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REVIEWED

IMPERIUM GALACTICA II page 46
ALIEN CROSSFIRE page 58

PREVIEWED

SHOGUN: TOTAL WAR page 20
METAL FATIGUE page 26

NEW!

A CLASSIC REVAMPED

RISK II

EXCLUSIVE SIX PAGE IN-DEPTH REVIEW!

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- SO YOU THINK YOU'VE GOT WHAT IT TAKES TO BE AN EVIL WIZARD...
- INTERVIEW WITH THE KING OF STRATEGY SID MEIER EXCLUSIVE!

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DIGITAL REALITY

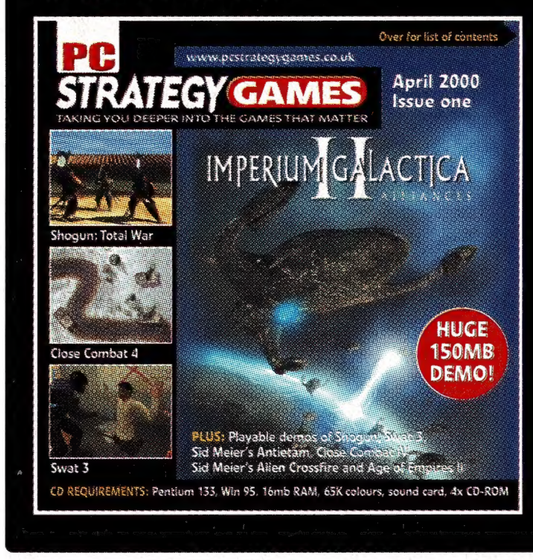
Contents

PC Strategy Games Issue One April 2000

Cover Disc

Whats's on the CD? 6

This month's Cover Disc boasts an embarrassment of riches. We've got playable demos of Shogun:Total War, Imperium Galactica II , Airport Inc, Close Combat IV, Alien Crossfire and Antietam. We've also got all those essential patches, utilities and drivers which no discerning gamer should be without.


Over for list of contents
PC STRATEGY GAMES
TAKING YOU DEEPER INTO THE GAMES THAT MATTER
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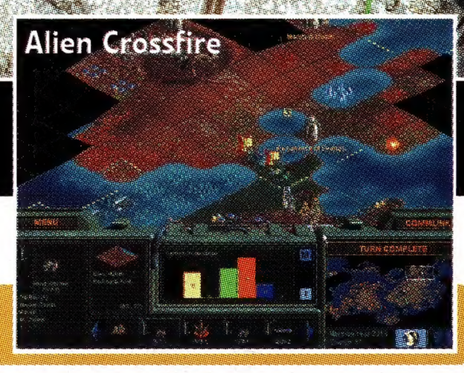
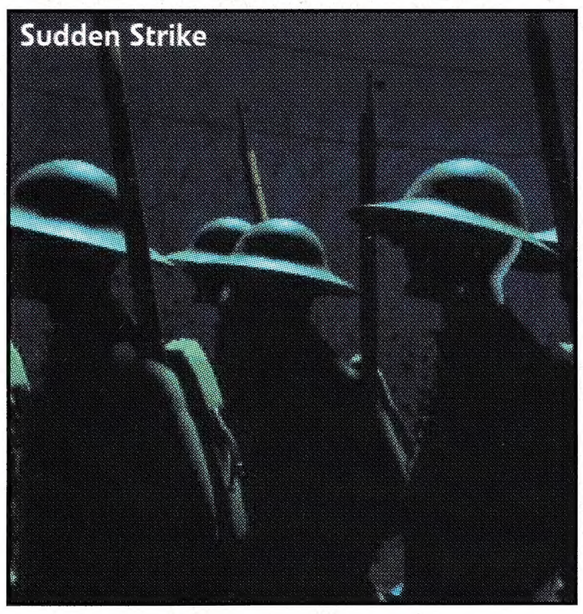
April 2000
Issue one
IMPERIUM GALACTICA II ALLIANCES
Shogun: Total War
Close Combat 4
Swat 3
HUGE 150MB DEMO!
PLUS: Playable demos of Shogun:Total War, Sid Meier's Antietam, Close Combat IV, Sid Meier's Alien Crossfire and Age of Empires II
CD REQUIREMENTS: Pentium 133, Win 95, 16mb RAM, 65K colours, sound card, 4x CD-ROM



Previews

Shogun: Total War 20

At long last, Shogun: Total War begins to emerge from the misty realms of myth and legend. Yep, we've finally gotten our hands on some playable code from the lads at Creative Assembly, and we think it looks very, very good indeed. Who knows, it may even have been worth the wait.



Sudden Strike 22

A World War II RTS, with massive maps and huge numbers of historically accurate units, from German programmers CDV? Hasn't anyone told them that the war is over?

Airport Inc 25

Krisalis' Airport management sim allows you to create, construct and run your own gateway to the skies. From duty-free to International terrorism, the buck stops with you.

Metal Fatigue 26

Despite appearances, GT Interactive's upcoming extravaganza isn't just another 3D RTS, but seeks to bring something new to the genre. Three arenas of play – surface, underground and orbital – combined with huge, fully customisable, robot thingies in a world inspired by an artistic vision drawn from weird and wonderful Japanese anime cartoons.

Departments

Editorial 5

Letters 19

Playguide 74

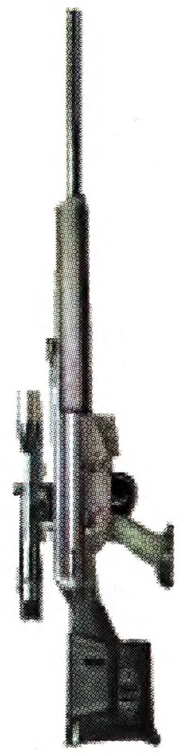
Getting thrashed at Age of Empires II? Seen your town centre burn one too many times? We at PCSG can help you turn back the barbarian hordes and expand your empire beyond your wildest dreams.

Strategies 80

Make it home in Homeworld; spear some rogues in Rogue Spear; be a robber baron in Railroad Tycoon II; hunt those bugs in Incubation and wipe out those Klingons in Star Trek: Birth of the Federation.

Books and Videos 94

Beevor's Stalingrad looks at one of the grimmest battles of last century; Jonathan Glover's Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century asks why humane people commit atrocities; a selection of new science fiction and crime thrillers; and Star Trek: Insurrection.



News & Features

News 10

Massive Studios's Ground Control – the thinking man's Tiberian Sun/Battle Zone cross – is almost here; Infogrames buys GT Interactive; Havas tops PC Data's chart of US best-sellers; real football managers playtest ANCO's Player Manager 2000; Red Storm is about to release both Shadow Watch and Urban Operations (a Rogue Spear add-on); Sid Meier's new game announced; Talonsoft loses some key people; Ubisoft reveal its strategy line-up for Spring 2000; X-Com fans in for a disappointment; German cult game Earth 2150 due for English release.

The Future of PC Strategy Games 28

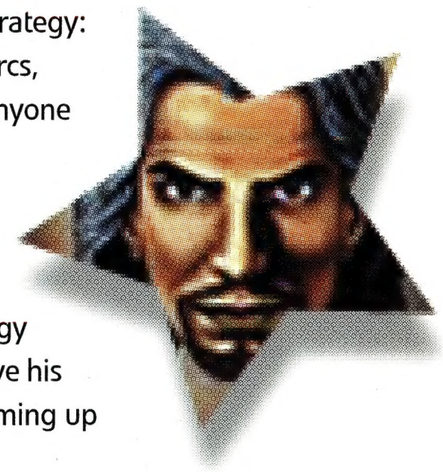
PCSG looks at strategy games past, present and future, including an overview of 5,000 years of gaming history.

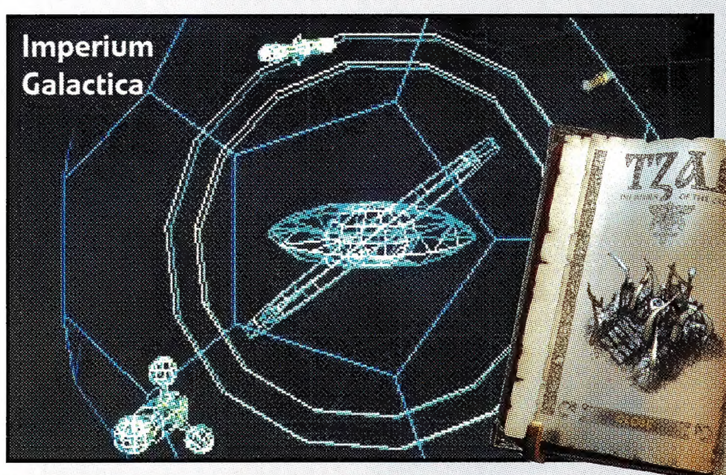
Magic in PC Strategy Games 86

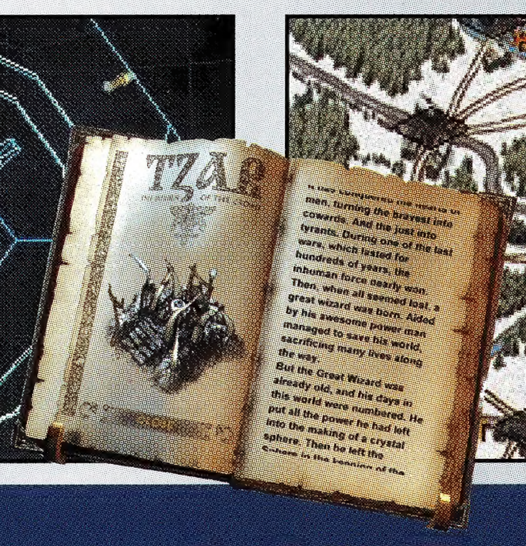
The strange marriage of fantasy and battlefield strategy: does magic have to be Tolkien-esque, elves-and-orcs, mass-produced drivel, asks Damon Wilson? Has anyone ever created an original magic game?

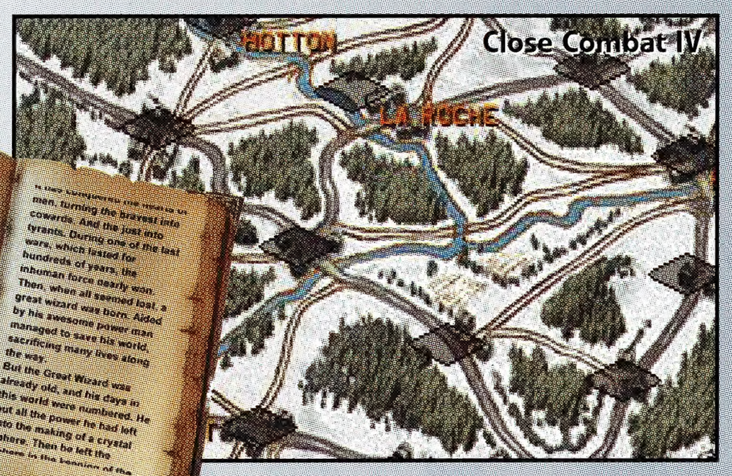
Developer profile: Sid Meier 34

PCSG speaks to Civilization designer Sid Meier, probably the most recognisable name in PC strategy games (not least because almost all his games have his name printed on the box in big letters). What's coming up next from Sid?





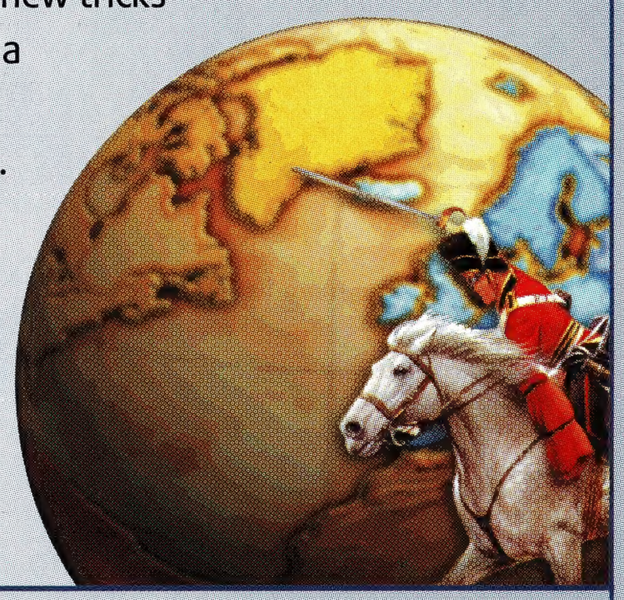

TZAR
In two kingdoms one reverts to men, turning the bravest into cowards. And the just into tyrants. During one of the last wars, which lasted for hundreds of years, the inhuman force nearly won. Then, when all seemed lost, a great wizard was born. Aided by his awesome power man managed to save his world, sacrificing many lives along the way.
But the Great Wizard was already old, and his days in this world were numbered. He put all the power he had left into the making of a crystal sphere. Then he left the



This Month's Reviews

Risk II 40

An old dog returns to the PC, having been taught a few new tricks since its last computer incarnation. The first PC Risk sold a million units for owner Hasbro, but left Risk afficionados feeling that their favourite game had been badly served. Has Deep Red hit the nail on the head with its unconventional reworking of this venerable old warhorse, or will all its playing about with the 40-year-old classic leave you cold? With sumptious graphics and clever game variants, Risk II should repay Deep Red's investment of time, energy and passion, and provide Hasbro with another winner.



Close Combat IV 52

In the bleak midwinter, Kampfgruppe Peiper's Panthers prepare to attack the Americans around Bastogne, in Atomic's latest addition to its WWII small unit tactical series. The basic game will be familiar to fans, but there's a new strategic overlay, which allows for a huge range of possible battles to be generated.

Sid Meier's Alien Crossfire 58

It's an add-on, Jim, but not as we know it. All the action takes place in an alternate timeline complete with new alien and human factions. We've also been given our own faction generator, new units, alien life-forms, artefacts and secret projects. Have we finally been given an expansion pack which truly lives up to the name?

Imperium Galactica II 46

GT Interactive's Space Opera has been billed as the ultimate RTS. It's got it all, sumptuous looks, a vast inter-galactic playing arena, Command and Conquer-esque land battles, colony building as in SimCity/ Civilization. In fact there's hardly a genre it doesn't appear to embrace. Can such a fabled gaming confection exist? PCSG investigates.

Tzar:Burden of the Crown 68

Zablac's Tzar: Burden of the Crown bears more than a passing resemblance to Microsoft's Age of Empires II. Is it a shamelessly derivative clone or, as some have suggested here at PCSG, an excellent RTS in its own right, which in some areas actually manages to shame Microsoft's latest gaming leviathan?

Lego Rock Raiders 72

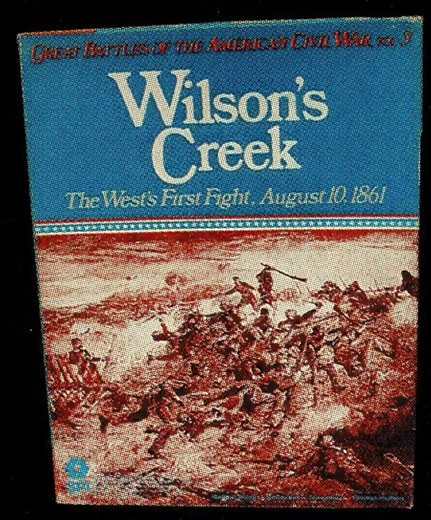
Oh no! Lot's of little Lego people have been stranded in a galaxy far, far, away. You've got to help them mine enough energy crystals to get home. "Surely a serious strategy games mag should have no truck with this sort of childish piffle", we hear you cry. But if you take a closer look, we think you'll be pleasantly surprised by a gentle little game which takes a lot of its cues from Bullfrog's Dungeon Keeper.

Diplomacy 66

Our second classic boardgame conversion this month. Microprose attempts to to give Diplomacy the PC treatment, complete with scratchy black and white newsreel footage from the turn of the century; but can the computer ever out-Machiavelli the human brain?

5th Column

Confessions of a serial gamer 91
Our editor reveals his sordid past as a major league player – 30 years hard labour on boardgames, role playing games and computer games. You may laugh, but the editorial team have to work with someone who played Risk in his cot...



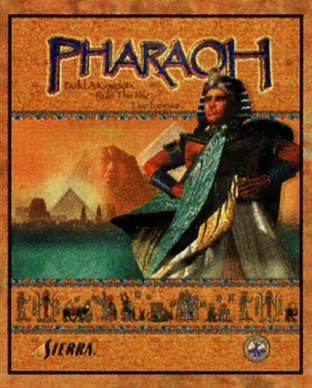
Armchair manager 92
What's the future likely to bring for sports management games, and in particular football games, asks our resident non-playing gaffer, Mike Siggins? Surely there has to be far more to the beautiful game than endless computer screens full of boring databases and spreadsheets?

A word from our publisher 96
Why is it that the man behind the Lords of the Realm and Caesar series is launching a computer games magazine? David Lester explains why his longtime passion for strategy games has prompted him to make the enormous leap from the PC screen to the printed page.

PHARAOH

Bring a monumental dynasty to life

The Ancient Egyptians didn't just build pyramids. They also built one of the most powerful civilisations the world has ever known. Pharaoh, from the makers of the highly acclaimed Caesar III, is your chance to become the ruler of Egypt. As a living God the whole future is in your hands. Govern your people, appease the vengeful Gods, build great monuments and create a dynasty that will control this fabulous kingdom for all eternity.



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WELCOME TO BRITAIN'S NEWEST AND MOST IN DEPTH GAMES MAGAZINE

When Microprose launched the original **Civilization** back in 1991, nobody – including Sid Meier, who created the game – ever thought it would be the best-seller that it became.

As Sid himself admits in our interview with him (see page 32), while the developers knew they had a good game on their hands, they weren't expecting it to top the charts. Back then, strategy games were considered worthy but dull, and were regarded by all except a dedicated hardcore following with as much enthusiasm as educational software.

At the time, the PC games market was dominated by flight sims, arcade conversions and point-and-click adventures. Anything that required real thought – like the text-based adventures which had been so hugely popular in the early to mid '80s, or hardcore wargames – had become niche products.

Sid's baby changed all that, paving the way for the PC games market of today – indeed, if you look at the best-selling PC games for last year, strategy games dominated the charts for 43 weeks out of 52. Strategy games now make up around 40% of the market in terms of sales, and the proportion is growing.

And that's where we come in. We think there are more than enough dedicated strategy gamers in the UK to support a magazine which caters to their particular interests. We could be biased, of course – after all, our publisher has written half a dozen best selling strategy games and ran one of the UK's top strategy games publishers for many years, while we've recruited a crack team of strategy game lovers on the editorial side.

But what does this mean for you? Well, it means that we know strategy games, inside and out. And it means that you can rely on us to give every game that comes into the office a solid workout before we even think about putting pen to paper.

When we review a game, three of our team will look at it and provide independent opinions. We'll play it multiplayer. We'll try out the scenarios and missions. We'll read the manual, cover to cover. We'll look at the website and other online support. We'll talk to the development team. We'll go back and load up similar games, either in terms of style of play, historical setting or theme. In fact, we'll do everything except jump on the box to make sure that the game delivers on its promise. And if the box looks particularly flimsy, then we might just do that, too.

Furthermore, we'll devote more editorial pages than any other UK magazine to strategy games – because that's the only sort of games we're going to be covering.

Granted, we're casting our nets fairly widely when it comes to the titles we will be reviewing, but all of them must include some element of strategy. That doesn't mean the only games we'll be writing about will be hardcore wargames; but we will be concentrating on games where a major part of the challenge revolves around resource management – whether that resource is time, troops, treasure or Tiberium.

We will look at wargames, of course: but we'll also cover sports management, business sims, building games, god games, real time strategy titles and even role playing games.

And, in the same way that Sid Meier's Civilization proved that strategy games didn't have to be boring, we're going to prove that a magazine about strategy games doesn't have to be boring, either.

If you like what you see in the following pages, I'd like to hear from you. And if you don't like what you see, then I'd like to hear from you even more.

Martin Croft
Editor
martinc@crimsonpublishing.co.uk

What's on the CD?

Our first ever cover CD, and we're starting as we mean to go on, with a feast of demos

PC STRATEGY GAMES
TAKING YOU DEEPER INTO THE GAMES THAT MATTER
Playable demos of Shogun, Swat 3, Sid Meier's Antietam, Close Combat 4: Battle of the Bulge.
Sid Meier's Alien Crossfire and Age of Empires II: Age of Kings – and indispensable patches and utilities.
HUGE 150MB DEMO!
IMPERIUM GALACTICA II
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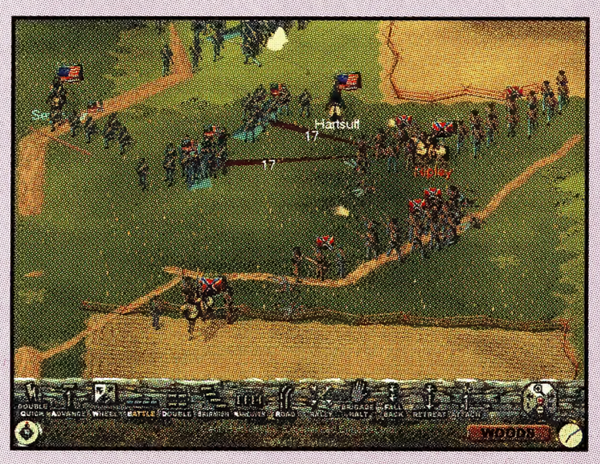
Playable demos

Imperium Galactica II
(*GT Interactive*)
Minimum Specs: 135 MB

An epic space empire RTS. A graphically beautiful game, but very complex; slogging through the tutorial may be time consuming, but you'll be adrift in the void without it. The game AI will run your planet bases for you, but it is worth starting each scenario with a close look at each planet and building up a specialised industry (i.e. ship building, tank research etc). When you've got enough factories running, tell the AI to build civilian projects to build up your populations then concentrate on increasing the size of your fleet – the alien empires won't be long in coming. Good luck – you'll need it.

Sid Meier's Antietam!
(*Firaxis*)
Minimum Specs: P133 (P166 recommended) 70MB to run. 23.5 MB (unzipped)

So you think table-top style war games are lousy? Obviously, you've never played Sid Meier's Gettysburg! This demo of the sequel might change your opinion for good. This is a demanding real-time battle simulator, so play through the tutorial sessions if you want to have a hope of thrashing the bluecoats. Remember you can give orders when in pause and if you're in a tight fix, try the Southern battle yell that would often have the Yankies bolting for their lives: 'You sure got a purdy mouth, boy!'



Swat 3
(*Sierra*)
Minimum Specs: P233, 32 MB RAM, 400 MB free hard drive + 50 MB swapfile 43.9 MB

Who says first person shooters aren't strategy games? This one has a refreshingly off-beat take on the first person squad based shooter. Now, we all love to indulge in the type of antics encouraged by the likes of Rogue Spear and Hidden & Dangerous, but if you approach Swat 3 with the same attitude you'll last approximately 3.2 seconds. No, this isn't about shooting

everything that moves, you're not part of some specialist anti-terrorist unit or a squad of Crack WWII commandos. This is SWAT street action, and, contrary to what you may have seen on TV, killing everything that moves will not result in a commendation and a night in with the leading lady. You'll need to take a softly, softly approach, asking – yes, asking – people to put down their weapons, handcuffing them, admonishing them about the error of their ways, and leading them outside to safety. It's demanding and in many ways more tactical than Rogue Spear. The interface is simplicity itself, it's all done with the mouse,and shouldn't present any difficulty to anyone who's dabbled with Hidden and Dangerous or Rainbow Six.

Vital Utilities

DirectX 7
The latest version of Microsoft's essential graphics drivers.

Winzip 7
The premier archiving tool, for contracting and expanding files.

Paint shop Pro 6
An excellent budget art package.

Adobe Acrobat
Necessary for reading some on-line game manuals.

Hypersnap
Allows you to take screenshots, even in games in DirectX/Direct3D or 3DFX modes.

Shogun (*Creative Assembly*)

Minimum Specs: DX 7, 3D Accelerator Required, Pentium II, 32MB RAM, 170 MB HD Space

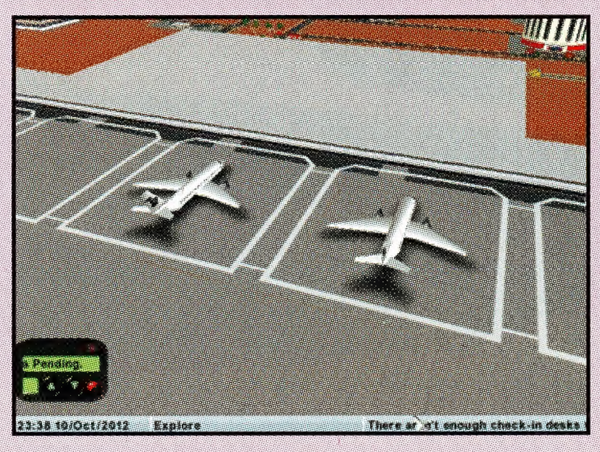
Allow us to introduce you to the visual delight that is Shogun. Yes, finally Creative Assembly has gotten off its behind and sent us here at PCSG a playable demo which will allow you to at least get a feel for the game. It's a tutorial walk through dealing with issues such as manipulating the in-game camera, manoeuvring units on both a tactical and strategic level, a simple two unit engagement and a final clash between two relatively small armies. OK, it's not a fully playable level, but what it does do is give you an insight into the awesome promise held out by Shogun. Just look at the potential offered by the command and control system, which allows complex and variegated movement, but which in use is simplicity itself. Look at the sumptuous graphics, mouth watering terrain, fogging effects, the choreographed movements of the units. Wonderful – let's hope the finished product lives up to this early promise.

Imperium Galactica II - rolling demo.

Yes, we know we've already put a mega-sized playable demo on the CD, but this is one of the best rolling demos we've ever seen, bar none. It looks absolutely awesome, to use an Americanism which is entirely appropriate in this case. You know those nice CGI bits in Babylon 5? This looks and sounds better. If the developers ever get tired of the computer games industry, it looks like they'll have a bright future in Hollywood. Even if you usually avoid rolling demos like the plague, we heartily recommend you give this one a whirl.

Airport Inc. (*Krisalis*)

Minimum Specs: 400Mhz Pentium, 64 MB RAM, 16 MB Video Card, 300 MB HD space. 4X CD-ROM, DX 7.0

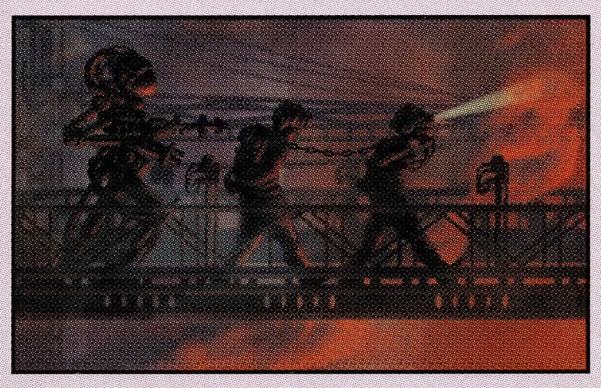


Airport Inc. allows you to create, build and manage your own airport. It follows the by now ubiquitous sim-game format. Buy some land (the closer to a metropolis the more expensive it's going to be). Lay down a runway. Construct and fit out a terminal. Make sure all the facilities both you and your client airlines are going to require are in place (fire services, police, refuelling facilities etc). Then open for business. You've got to keep the airport ticking over smoothly while guarding against threats such as international terrorism and that dreaded catastrophe/disaster that's never too far away from becoming a reality. It's detailed and intense, a lot of it being micro-management stuff which should delight the purists out there.

Alien Crossfire (*Electronic Arts*)

Minimum Specs: P166, 32MB Ram, 25.6 MB

If you missed Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri (perhaps because you didn't realise it was actually Civilisation 3 under the wrong title) now is your chance to see the enhanced version. You'll get a range of new human factions to chose from plus two factions of a decidedly alien variety. If that's not enough for you, the whole thing takes place in a parallel universe to the original game. If you've played Alpha Centauri, or indeed any of the Civilisation series, you should be instantly at home with Alien Crossfire. If you've read our review this month, you'll no doubt be eager to give this a go; don't expect a faction editor, however, because inexplicably Firaxis hasn't included it in the demo.



Patches on the CD

Abomination: The Nemesis Project 2.64
A substantial multiplayer patch which also provides Logitech wheel support .

Age of Empires II – AI Patch
Addresses the problem of the computer player resigning after only a few minutes of play.

Alpha Centauri 4.0
Includes a new landmark, the manifold nexus, support for a wheelmouse and lets you see an AI player's social engineering setting. The patch also addresses an array of minor game play issues.

Creatures 3 – Update 1
Allows third party objects and creatures to be inserted into the game, and fixes a couple of minor issues.

Command and Conquer: Tiberian Sun 1.17
Nice little patch that ensures faster gameplay and adds a few new features.

Dungeon Keeper II 1.3 – 1.6
Adds elite creatures. NB This patch will affect game positions. Once installed, all previous game saves will restart at the beginning of the saved level.

Dungeon Keeper II 1.5 – 1.6
Adds elite creatures. NB This patch will affect saved game positions. Once installed, all previous game saves will restart at the beginning of the saved level.

Hidden and Dangerous 1.3
A very nifty patch which addresses a multitude of issues, but is most useful for its various AI fixes.

Rogue Spear 2.05
Primarily a multiplayer patch but also includes Game Spy support and ensures that the game will run properly under Windows 2000.

Theme Park
A comprehensive patch that addresses hang up, sound issues and minor gameplay issues.

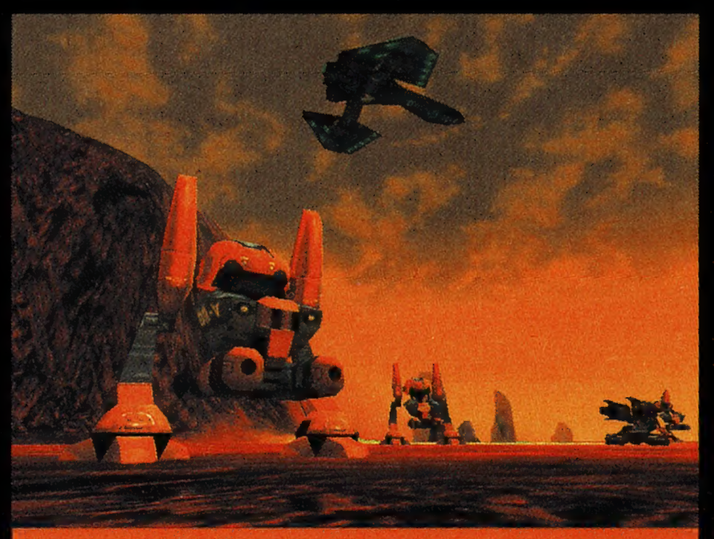
Total Annihilation: Kingdoms 2.0
This is an excellent patch that contains plenty of gameplay modifications. Most importantly, it considerably enhances game speed and playability for both multi- and single player games.

Warzone 2100 1.09
Combines the two previously available updates with lots of additional unit and weapon mods.

Who better to make life and death decis

Control a Battalion

Face the front lines in first-person, calling in airstrikes and commanding futuristic customisable vehicles, including tanks, walkers and hoverbikes, via a powerful interface.



Destroy Alien Scum

Take on morphing enemies with advanced unit tactics like choosing the best weapon and mine-laying. Instant action and strategy missions get you into the solo or online warfare.

Battle and Build

Use the terrain to your advantage on five completely 3-D planets. Form massive armies, construct bases and deploy your defenses across an alien solar system.

Battlezone™ Critical Acclaim:

"an essential purchase for any PC gamer"
PC format 91%

Recommended PC Format Gold Award

"a modern classic."
Edge 9/10

EDGE®

"PC Gamer weeps tears of joy at the birth of a genre"
PC Gamer 93%

PC GAMER

PANDEMIC

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ions in battle than a man in harm's way?

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GAMES DIGEST

UK HIGH STREET software retailers Electronics Boutique and Game, part of the EB Stores Group Ltd, have launched e-commerce websites. Customers will be able to take advantage of special offers while continuing to make use of their loyalty cards, and dissatisfied customers can return products bought online to high street stores. The Electronics Boutique and Game websites are at www.eb.uk.com and www.game.uk.com.

KOREAN SOFTWARE developer Phantagram has signed a publishing deal with Gathering of Developers for Kingdom Under Fire. Players take control of one of seven Knights, each with different strengths, weaknesses and special abilities, and battle their enemies for control of the realm. The game features three separate playing modes: as RTS, Knights issue orders to their units, develop new technolgies for upgrades and mine resources; as a straight actioner,

players control knights in a fighting game; and as an RPG, in a similar style to Blizzard's Diablo, as the Knights undertake solo missions.

CDV, DEVELOPER of the World War II RTS Sudden Strike (see preview, page 22), is to float on the Neuer Markt, the Frankfurt-based stock exchange. The company plans to raise DM10 million from the IPO, and says a stock exchange listing will allow it to raise funds to catch up with rival French, North American and British firms. www.cdv.de for more details.

Germans invade UK in May...

The latest invasion from Germany is courtesy of developer Topware Interactive, whose visually sumptious RTS Earth 2150 is to be distributed in the UK by Mattel Interactive.

The game has been available in Germany – where it has been a top-seller – since before Christmas and is being translated into English at the moment.

Earth 2150 features a fully rotatable camera, gorgeously rendered landscapes, a day and night cycle and weather conditions which affect play. The backstory is set in a future Earth dominated by three factions. A devastating war knocks the Earth out of its orbit and on collision course with the sun, so the three cliques have to build enough ships to evacuate to Mars. Unfortunately, there aren't enough materials on Earth and the Moon for all three groups to escape.

Above & Left: Superbly rendered artwork and excellent game graphics made it a hit in Germany

Each of the factions employs radically different technologies and weapon systems, and the game features a plethora of land, sea and air units. You can also take the action underground. Topware and Mattel promise comprehensive support for multiplay with up to 15 players being able to take part in a single game. There is what appears to be a very comprehensive map editor.

The game has a complex research tree, which lets players design their own units in a similar way to the modular approach in Warzone 2100.

The game should ship in the UK on May 5. In the meantime, take a look at the Earth 2150 site at www.earth2150.de.

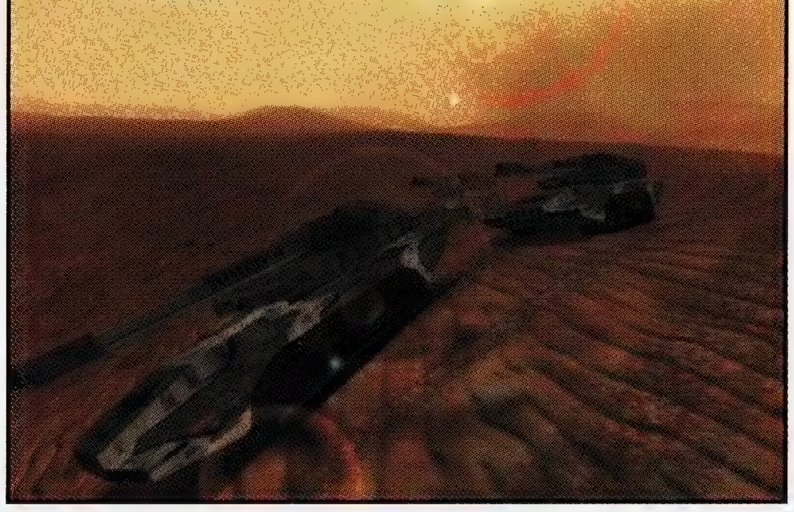
BR

...while Swedes ready Ground Control

Up-and-coming Swedish game developers Massive Studios is busy finalising its first product, entitled Ground Control. Described as a cross between Total Annihilation, Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun and Battlezone, Sierra is publishing it in the US and UK.

Unlike those games, however, management and resource collection have been abandoned in favour of a more streamlined, deeper tactical battle phase. Set on a post-apocalyptic Earth some 400 years into the future, two rival factions battle for control of new planets to colonise, while searching out alien technology to enhance their units and dictate their tactical decisions.

The developers say that the technology tree has been firmly integrated into the game's narrative with the result that the usual RTS solution of amassing an overwhelming force has been removed, forcing players to develop more complex strategies. Units must be selected before entering combat according to the make-up of the opposing force, the terrain likely to be encountered and personal battle plans. In this respect,



the game has more in common with wargames such as Close Combat IV: Battle of the Bulge.

Early reports suggest that the AI and graphics are particularly impressive. According to the Massive Studios website (www.massive.se), the game should go gold around Easter.

MS

Sid the monster man

Sid Meier's next game is to be a monster – a strategy game in which players control not human civilisations seeking to rule the earth, but dinosaur species seeking to avoid extinction. And Sid (pictured right) also has ambitious plans to link his dinosaur game with Civilization 3, planned for release later this year by Microprose, and Alpha Centauri, the Civilization-like game already published by his company, Firaxis.

"We've been talking about a concept we're calling 'the sweep of time', which would link the three projects together," Sid Meier told PCSG recently (see exclusive interview, page 34). "What you do in one game would influence what happens at the start of the next."

Meanwhile, work progresses on plans for Civilization 3. Sid and Brian Reynolds, his business partner in Firaxis and the man behind much of Civilization 2, want to make the new game accessible to those who haven't played Civilization or any of its sequels, while still maintaining interest for those who have. No decision has yet been taken on whether it will be real time or turn-based, although Sid hints that Firaxis may mix the two, as in his American Civil War game, Gettysburg.

Sid adds: "Obviously, when we're designing Civilization 3, we have to bear in mind the history of Civilization and the kind of people who like to play it. And they're not shy about coming forward with ideas, either – we've got a notebook filled with ideas that's several inches thick."

MC

STRATEGY GAMES: Forthcoming Releases

All release dates are subject to change; none are guaranteed.

FEBRUARY
Airport Inc. Krysalis / Take 2
Empire of the Ants Microids
Imperium Galactica 2 Digital Reality / GT Interactive
Hidden & Dangerous: Fight for Freedom Take 2 Interactive
Odium Ubisoft
Risk II Deep Red / Hasbro Interactive
The Sims Maxis / EA

MARCH
20,000 Leagues: The Adventure Continues Southpeak Interactive
B-17 Flying Fortress: The Mighty Eighth Wayward / Hasbro Interactive
Battlezone 2 Pandemic / Activision
Business Tycoon Stardock / Ubisoft
Heroes of Might & Magic 8 MicroProse
Icewind Dale Black Isle
Majesty: Sovereign of Ardania Cyberlore / Hasbro Interactive
Player Manager 2000 Anco
Reach for the Stars Mindscape / Mattel Media
Rising Sun Talonsoft / Take 2 Interactive
Road To Moscow UbiSoft
Shogun: Total War Electronic Arts
Theocracy Ubisoft
Total Annihilation: Kingdoms - The Iron Plague Cavedog / GT Interactive
Tzar: The Burden Of The Crown Haemimont / Zablac Entertainment
Wall Street Tycoon Lumis / UbiSoft

APRIL
Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun - FireStorm Westwood / EA
Dark Reign 2 Pandemic Studios / Activision
Evolva Computer Artworks / Virgin Interactive
Ground Control Massive / Sierra
Metal Fatigue Psygnosis / GT Interactive
Iron Strategy Nikita
Shadow Watch Red Storm
Star Trek: Armada Activision
Star Wars: Force Commander LucasArts / Activision
Stars Supernova Mare Crisium / Empire
Submarine Titans Ellipse Studios
Sudden Strike CDV
Terminus Vicarious Visions
UEFA Manager 2000 Bubball Systems / Infogrames
Warlords Battlecry SSI / Mindscape

MAY
Allegiance (On-line) Microsoft
Conquest: Frontier Wars Digital Anvil / Microsoft
Destroyer Command SSi / Mindscape
Earth 2150 TopWare Interactive / Mattel Media
Fading Suns: Noble Armada Ripcord Games
Starlancer Digital Anvil + Warthog / Microsoft
Starship Troopers MicroProse / Hasbro
Wargames: Retribution Interactive Studios / MGM Interactive

JUNE
Age of Empires II: Expansion Pack Ensemble / Microsoft
Kingdom Under Fire Phantagram / GOD
Rogue Spear: Covert Operations Red Storm Entertainment
Shadow Watch Red Storm Entertainment
Tachyon: Beyond the Fringe Novalogic
Warhammer 40 000: Agents of Death Mirage Media
Warmonkeys Silicon Dreams / Take 2 Interactive

3RD QUARTER
Arabian Nights Cryo Interactive
Battle Isle IV Cauldron / Blue Byte
Civil War Generals III Impressions / Sierra
Chessmaster 8000 Mindscape
Harpoon 4 SSi / Mindscape
Panzer General Assault II: Eastern Front SSi / Mindscape
Silent Hunter II SSi / Mindscape
(Untitled) Pyro / Eidos Interactive
Warzone 2120 Eidos Interactive

4TH QUARTER
Black and White Lionhead / EA
Close Combat V Atomic / Mindscape
Commandos 2 Pyro Studios / Eidos Interactive
Freelancer Digital Anvil / Microsoft
Gangsters 2 Eidos Interactive
Giants Planet Moon / Interplay
Harn: Bloodline Auran / EA
Napoloen: Empire Builder Talonsoft / Take 2
Republic: The Revolution Elixir / Eidos
Settlers 4 Blue Byte
Warcraft III Blizzard / Sierra
X-Com Alliance MicroProse / Hasbro

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information in the above table, it is intended for guidance only. Games are subject to delay and cancellation, and all release dates, titles and publisher and developer information are subject to change. PCSG claims no responsibility for any inaccuracies that later may come to light.

GAMES DIGEST

WORK CONTINUES on MicroProse's Majesty: Sovereign of Ardania. So far it looks, ahem, quaint but promises to provide a unique take on fantasy gaming. Instead of ordering units to do something, players effectively have to bribe them with a system of rewards. From what we've seen so far it seems to combine elements of RPG, empire building, resource management and RTS in one package. It should be with us toward the end of Q1.

TALONSOFT IS currently working on a game called Panzer Brigade. Details are still sketchy and no firm release date has been set.

ACTIVISION'S Star Trek: Armada is one of a long line of Trek-based releases expected this

year. Armada promises to deliver a tough strategic challenge while also incorporating real time space battles. You'll play as Federation, Klingons, Romulans or Borg. Resistance will be futile. It's due in Q2.

STARSHIP TROOPERS from Microprose has undergone a make over. Originally intended as a third person shooter, Microprose now plans an RTS. Fans of the Paul Verhoeven movie will be instantly at home with the look and feel of the game, but Microprose has gone to the original book to provide the basis for actual gameplay so the hideous bugs should be facing space marines in armoured battle suits rather than high school graduates in T-shirts. It's due out in Q2.

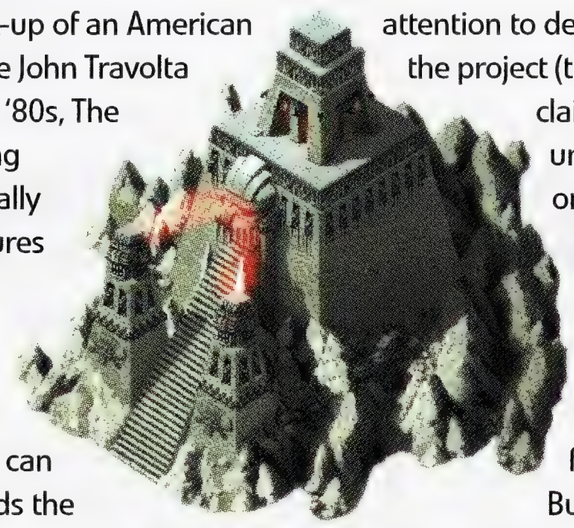
Ubisoft adds to strategy line

Ubisoft has revealed its strategy game line-up for the first half of the year, and the titles on show the other week in London ranged from business sims through adventure to empire building game.

First up is Business Tycoon, where players take an international corporation from the depths of depression to the heights of world domination. Management takes place at every level from the boardroom down to the coffee shop via the trading floor. Gaining profit and recognition can be achieved through hard work, honesty and a great product, but dirty tricks are also at the player's disposal.

Similar in theme is Wall Street Tycoon, a share trading simulation that allows players to get the feel of dealing on a stock exchange without having to mortgage their house or sell the kids into slavery. If enough money can be earned through buying and selling shares, companies can be bought and sold. The player reacts to news on the ticker tape, and a number of historically accurate scenarios can be played, including the Oil Crisis of the '70s and the Wall Street Crash of 1929. The game also features random event scenarios, multiplayer options, and an in-depth tutorial section.

Off the business theme, Odium is an isometric turn-based game which also incorporates some RPG elements. In a post cold-war environment, the player assumes the role of Lieutenant Cole Sullivan, who leads and his team on a number of missions in a eastern European mock-up of an American City (like the dire John Travolta movie from the '80s, The Experts), battling various genetically modified creatures as they go.



To increase the game's longevity, different routes can be taken towards the final showdown, involving different combinations of missions.

Last up, and most eagerly awaited in the PC Strategy Games offices, is Theocracy. Players take control of an Aztec tribe in 12th century Mexico with the aim of developing an Empire by foul means or fair. You can take control of neighbouring territories and try to change the course of history by building a civilisation which can resist the Spanish invasion.

The usual empire game elements – resource collecting, trading and diplomacy, building and unit upgrades – are all present and correct, but the added extras, attention to detail and scale of the project (the programmers claim that 50,000 units can appear on-screen at one time with no appreciable slowdown) are all very impressive.

Odium is set for February, while Business Tycoon, Wall Street Tycoon and Theocracy are planned for March.

MS

PM2K gets managerial endorsement

ANCO's much anticipated football management game, Player Manager 2000 has received a massive boost to its credibility – it has been playtested by a number of real-life football managers, including Graham Taylor, Bobby Robson, and John Gregory. Gordon Strachan even went so far as to enthuse: "Player Manager 2000 is fantastic! I'm really enjoying this, believe it or not."

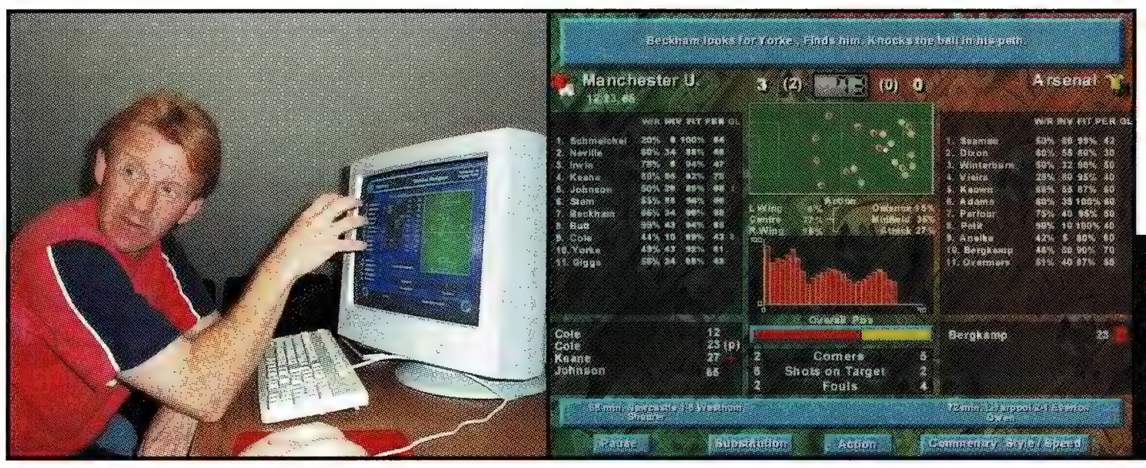
Expected to prove a serious challenger to Championship Manager's crown, the game – scheduled for a March release date – was play tested by the managers for at least an hour, with several changes being made to the game on the basis of their suggestions.

The game itself promises to add a slew of new features in an attempt to overhaul the genre, including the ability to watch the games in real-time as they are played.

Masses of data will be available to players to help them fine tune their teams (30, 000 players are included), but ANCO claims that the game itself is not statistics driven – success comes only through balancing your team, tactics and training, the company says.

For £9.99 a month, budding managers will be able to participate in online leagues over the Internet, wheeling and dealing with other players from around the globe in the bid to fill the trophy cabinet. The online game will have the same features as the CD-Rom version, with the addition of options such as chatrooms and new player data.

MS

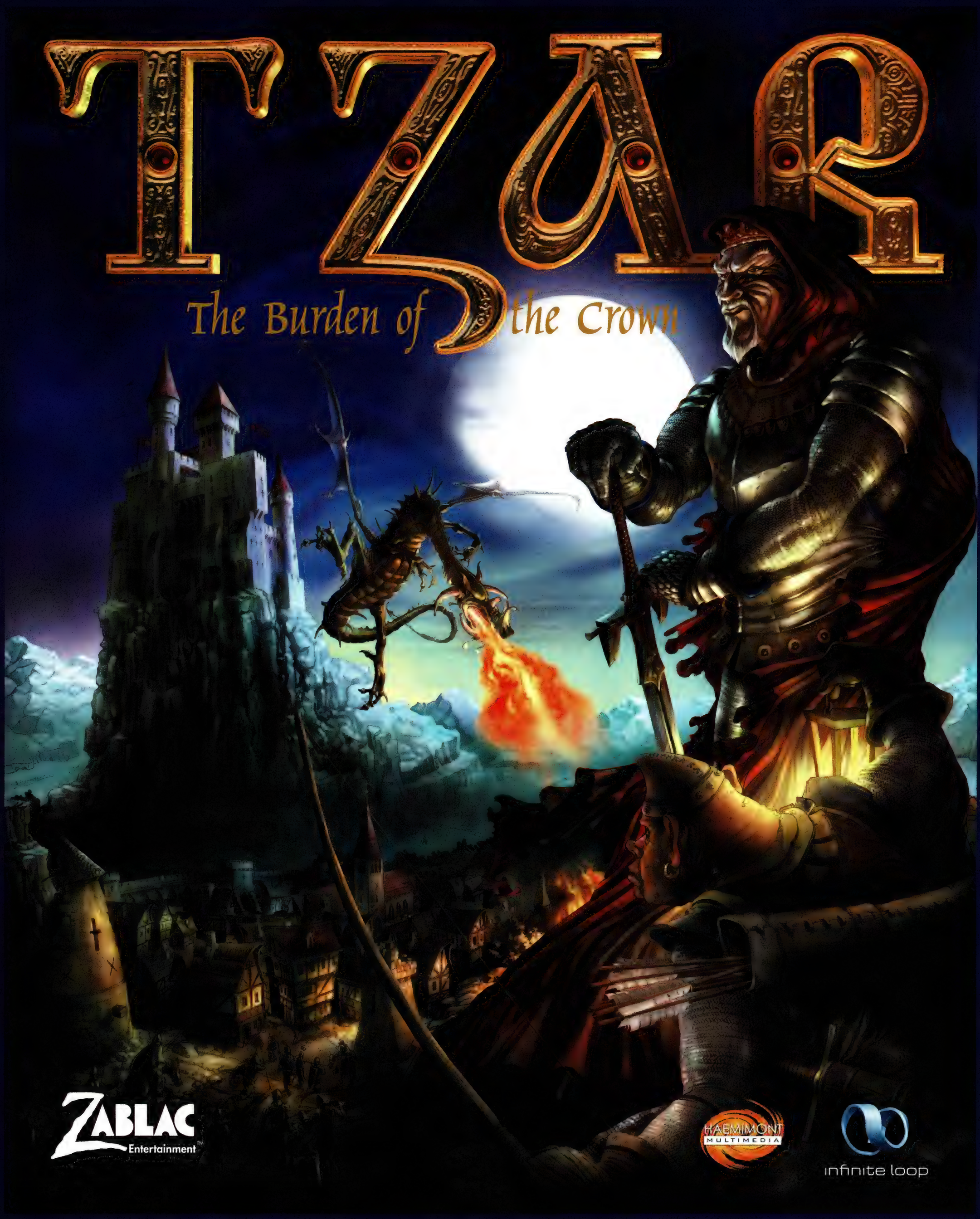


Left: Gordon Strachan was one of a number of real football managers who enjoyed PM2K's virtual challenge

"Haemimont have certainly proved that their world is the biggest of them all....the resulting conflicts are truly epic". PC Gamer.

TZAR

The Burden of the Crown



Build an empire and unite a warring world in this absorbing game of magic, management and military strategy.

Available for PC CD ROM - 25 February 2000

www.zablac.co.uk

GAMES DIGEST

ENSEMBLE STUDIOS, developer of Age of Empires II, has announced it is working on an expansion pack to be released this summer. No details of the subject matter yet.

ONLINE STRATEGY gaming appears to be a major wave of the future, and Microsoft intends to be riding it. The giant software company has announced that it will be launching a new massively multiplayer game, Allegiance, in Q2. Allegiance will be a 3D space combat sim, playable only via the Internet Gaming Zone, in which players can either just throw themselves straight into an instant dog fight, or join with others to create a team, plan strategies and even manage resources.

3DO IS SET to release two new Army Men games over the next six months. AM: Toys in Space and AM: Air Attack respectively take the plastic soldier game off-planet and add paratroops.

BATTLECRUISER MILLENNIUM, a Windows-friendly sequel to DOS-only real-time space strategy game Battlecruiser, is set for release in Q2 of this year.

ALMOST 10 YEARS after the launch of the ground-breaking Amiga game, Hired Guns – a first person shooter which let the player see through the eyes of all the four controllable characters in the game at once – two games are in the works to reproduce the effect in 3D. X-Com: Allegiance has slipped to Christmas so appropriately enough GT's Hired Guns should be the first out, in summer.

Talonsoft loses key personnel

US Wargame developer Talonsoft, founded by Jim Rose and John Davidson in 1995, has lost a number of key personnel. Those who have left – Charles Kibler, Tim Kipp, Steve Langmead, Bob McNamara and Robert Waters – constituted the core of Talonsoft's Wargame development unit.

Talonsoft is best known for its Battleground series of wargames, and for its more recent East Front game series. Since the company was bought by Take 2 Interactive just over a year ago, the company name has been used as a brand for Take 2's wargames range, including more mass-market titles such as the 3D commando game, Hidden & Dangerous.

The five are to join the appropriately named Breakaway Games which was responsible for the design and development of Firaxis' game Sid Meier's Antietam, the successor to Gettysburg. Breakaway has a game based on the D-Day landings in preparation.

Kibler in particular was responsible for much of the development of AH's cult small unit combat game, Advanced Squad Leader. Hasbro has announced plans to launch a PC version of ASL by the end of this year. A source at Take 2 Interactive says that the Talonsoft departures will not have any significant effect on the brand's release schedule.

Take 2 Interactive, meanwhile, has announced that it expects that profits for the first quarter of its latest financial year could well be higher than business analysts expect, thanks to growth in both its publishing and distribution divisions.

MS

Left: Talonsoft's hex-based wargames have been popular with a hardcore clientele: recently, Take2 has tried for a more mass market

GT Interactive name is to disappear

The name GT Interactive is to disappear from April 1, following the company's acquisition by French software publisher Infogrames. UK titles which have been already published or which are about to be released will still carry the GT branding – including Imperium Galactica 2 and Metal Fatigue – but those which hit the shelves after that date will be branded Infogrames.

Meanwhile, it is understood that US developer Cavedog, acquired by GT a year ago, is to be relocated to the UK, although since most of Cavedog's staff were fired following the unexpected cancellation of its Amen: The Awakening title, it is unclear how many staff are likely to make the move (if any).

Another phase of what the GT management called the 'internal product development refocusing' saw a number of other Cavedog projects outsourced or cancelled, including Total Annihilation 2 and The Iron Plague, the official Total Annihilation: Kingdoms expansion pack.

But an Infogrames insider told PCSG that while it is true that a number of staff have been laid off, and the office will be moving to Europe, programming will continue on the TA series and the Boneyards on-line gaming community.

Furthermore, The Iron Plague is apparently at the polishing stage and will be released shortly in the US and should hit UK shelves in March.

More information at www.gtinteractive.com and www.cavedog.com.

MS

Below: IG2 and Metal Fatigue last for GT brand?

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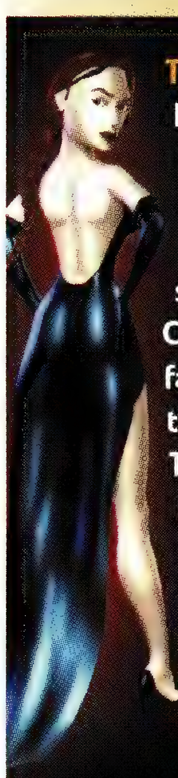
GAMES DIGEST



TOMB RAIDER publisher Eidos, creator of Lara Croft, saw its share price tumble after warning that sales over the Christmas period had fallen short of expectations. However, Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation and Championship Manager 99/00 were both notable successes. Official financial results will be formally announced at the end of February. No corporate reshuffle is planned; instead, the company is pinning its hopes on this year's releases.

THE SEQUEL to the very popular but graphically-challenged multiplayer space empire game Stars! is due for release soon. Being developed by Mare Crisium, the software company formed by the game's original developer Jeff McBride, it's called Stars Supernova! and is expected to offer much the same epic scope and depth of its predecessor – but with some rather nice looking graphics too. Expect it towards the end of Q1.

THIEF 2, sequel to Looking Glass Studios' excellent sneak-em-up Thief: The Dark Project, looks to be launched sometime in Q2. The developers are promising improved graphics and harder missions, plus some new additions to the weaponry. Perhaps more importantly, it's also going to incorporate native multiplay support.

WILL WRIGHTS' The Sims should hit shelves during Q1. The simulation of ordinary people's lives – a sort of soap opera management game-meets-dolls house – has attracted much speculation. Wright says that he hopes the game will help us all to discover more about ourselves and to lead more fulfilling lives.

Red Storm rising

Not content to rest on their Rogue Spear laurels, Red Storm Entertainment has recently completed Shadow Watch, another tactical game that blends elements of role-playing and turn-based.

The player controls six operatives working for a shady, Kafkaesque organisation known simply as The Corporation, and has to complete a campaign of 16 missions set in major cities around the world. Various other shady organisations are intent on sabotaging The Corporation's pride and joy, a space station, and it's the gamer's job to frustrate them.

Each operative has their own special capability – from sniping to espionage – which can be developed throughout the game and exploited in certain missions.

While the game's distinctive comic retro-design appears to be derived from 'Aeon Flux,' a Manga-style US animation series, the gameplay is similar to Jagged Alliance or Incubation – actions such as movement, firing and healing are determined by the action points available. There are some interesting additions: line-of-sight determines what is visible to you, so that all rooms are blacked out until entered; action points are increased in stressful situations and characters may go temporarily AWOL if courage deserts them.

Below: Red Storm's Manga-style Shadow Watch

Due out in March in the US, a UK release date has not yet been set.

Meanwhile, Rogue Spear is to get its first mission pack. Urban Operations is scheduled for an April release Stateside, with a European release likely to follow shortly afterwards. The missions included will be similar to those in Sierra's SWAT 3, Rogue Spear's closest and biggest rival.

MS

X-Com slips to Xmas

Fans eagerly awaiting the fifth instalment in the X-Com series may be disappointed. Early sightings of X-Com: Alliance suggested that the game would be a visual stunner, giving the player first-person control of four space marines trapped on a gorgeous, Unreal engine alien world. Unfortunately, the project has slipped and slipped. Originally aimed for release around about now, indications are we will be lucky if we see the game materialise by Christmas 2000.

The reason is that Hasbro Interactive – owners of X-Com developers Microprose – has recently 'downsized' their workforce following a restructuring of their software division. Microprose promises that X-Com: Alliance will not be canned, despite these problems. The company also says X-Com: Genesis, the sixth episode in the series, is still in development – but its tentative release date seems now to have vanished over the event horizon.

MS

Havas leads 1999 US sales charts

Havas Interactive was the winner in the US entertainment software market in 1999, according to recent figures released by market analysts PC Data, with Electronic Arts placing second and relative newcomer Hasbro Interactive third.

Havas took 16 % of the market by sales revenue, compared to EA's 14% and Hasbro's 12 %.

Of more interest to the dedicated strategy gamer will be the news that six of the top 20 selling games of 1999 in North America were strategy titles, including Hasbro's Roller Coaster Tycoon at the top of the tree, EA's SimCity 3000 in second place and Microsoft's Age of Empires II: Age of Kings at number four.

The latter could well make it onto next year's chart, however, as Microsoft has recently revealed that the game has shipped more than two million copies world-wide, reaching the top of the weekly sales charts in the US, the UK, Korea and Australia. But EA had a consolation prize: its SimCity 3000 was America's highest-grossing PC game of the year.

Havas' performance represents a slight dip compared with the PC Data charts for 1998, when the French-owned company took a 19% share of the US market. Havas subsidiary Blizzard saw its Starcraft take the coveted number one slot while its Diablo also performed respectably, ending the year at number nine.

MS

PC Data top 10 game titles in the US 1999	
1	**Roller Coaster Tycoon** (Hasbro Interactive)
2	**SimCity 3000** (Electronic Arts)
3	**Who Wants To Be A Millionaire** (Disney)
4	**Age Of Empires II: Age Of Kings** (Microsoft)
5	**Starcraft** (Havas Interactive)
6	**Half-Life** (Havas Interactive)
7	**Command & Conquer 2: Tiberian Sun** (Electronic Arts)
8	**Microsoft Flight Simulator** (Microsoft)
9	**Frogger** (Hasbro Interactive)
10	**Baldur's Gate** (Interplay)

Source PC Data

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- Faster, larger and more detailed than ever
- Introducing a new scouting system
- Additional characters in the game to give greater feedback
- A complete graphical overhaul
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- Internet players will be able to use online matchmaking services to find opponents and start games.

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Letters

Have your say on strategy gaming issues that make your blood boil...

LOVE BYTES

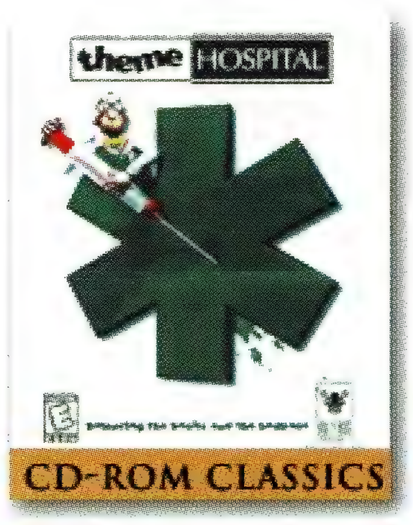
Dear PCSG,

I've been trying to get my wife into computer games for years. I'm a passionate gamer, but she just thinks I'm indulging a Peter Pan syndrome. I love my wife deeply, but how can a person live with such a crass philistine?

The only games I've ever managed to get her to try are an adventure, Blade Runner, and a couple of strategy games (Theme Hospital and Civilisation: Test of Time). She liked the strategy games because 'they were based in the real world'.

So, my major hope for saving my marriage is the games industry creating some strategy games that touch on the real world in some way... And what do we get? Endless war, science-fiction and fantasy games. Don't these people realise that there are (sex) lives at stake?

John Dennell, North London, via e-mail



PCSG John – can I call you John? – let me start-off by telling you that this is a PC games letters page, not an Agony Aunt column. Second, the whole computer industry is mad keen to get more women addicted to games. This would allow game publishers to get their hands on vast, as yet untapped supplies of money; so they are right behind your efforts to brainwash – sorry, convert – your lady-wife. Finally, perhaps I might suggest a bit of role-swapping? Just in the spirit of fun, you understand – nothing perverse. Try getting her to choose a game. She might commit more time to it if she had some control over the subject matter.

ALPHA MAIL

Dear PCSG,

I'm a big fan of Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri, partly because the patches released for the game over the last year have not been bug fixes, but add new features like the Borehole Cluster. Now Firaxis has released an expansion pack that seems to be made-up of these previously free additions, and at roughly the same cost as the original game. Why lay out the extra dosh?

Mad Dog, Norwich, via e-Mail

PCSG Well, Mr Dog, the Alien Crossfire add-on pack's main features are the new secret projects, weird factions and an excellent faction editor. These were never available over the web and are well worth the admission fee. Sid Meier himself says that Alien Crossfire is Alpha Centauri 1.5, and who are we to argue with the Sidster? Anyway, drop back by your local games store and you might find the price has come down – we saw one last week for £15, which is well worth it. Some retailers had a special offer where you got Alien Crossfire free if you bought Alpha Centauri, but it sounds like you've already got Centauri, and we think the offer's over.

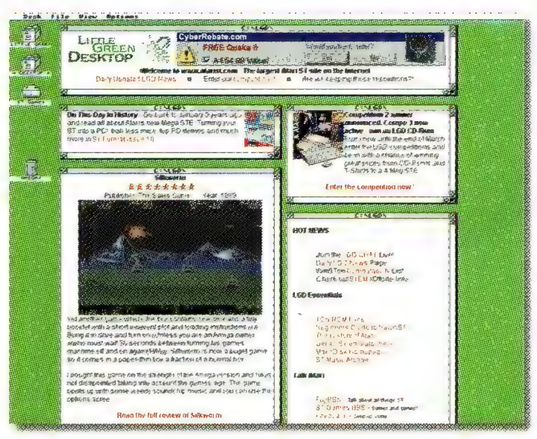
AMIGA ANGST

Dear PCSG,

Recently I've begun to experience an inexplicable hankering to recreate the Halcyon days of my gaming youth. I'm particularly interested in the possibilities offered by emulation software and I'd love to get my hands on the excellent Magnetic Scrolls text adventures which enthralled me way back in my Amstrad/Atari St days. Any ideas?

Julia Weech, Hammersmith, London

PCSG Retrogaming has become extremely popular of late, perhaps because current games lack the sheer playability of many older titles. There are a huge number of sites to cater for those who fancy a nostalgic trip down memory lane. You're going to need a programme (or emulator) which re-creates the platform of your choice on your PC. For Atari ST emulation software your best bet is The Little Green Desktop (lgd.fatal-design.com) a site which contains everything you'll need to recreate an ST on your PC. Other sites include Classic Gaming.com which caters for all the old 8 bit machines, and a lot of the old gaming consoles such as Coleco Vision and Vectrex. You'll need some games (in ROM format) which are available all over the web. Before you download these goodies, you should be aware that the legality of ROMs and their associated Emulators is a grey area. The Emulators are legal; however, the ROMs, technically, may not be, because of copyright. As long as people aren't making money out of the ROMs, it's probably OK.



PC STRATEGY GAMES Letter of the Month

BUGGY GAMES BUG ME!

Dear PCSG

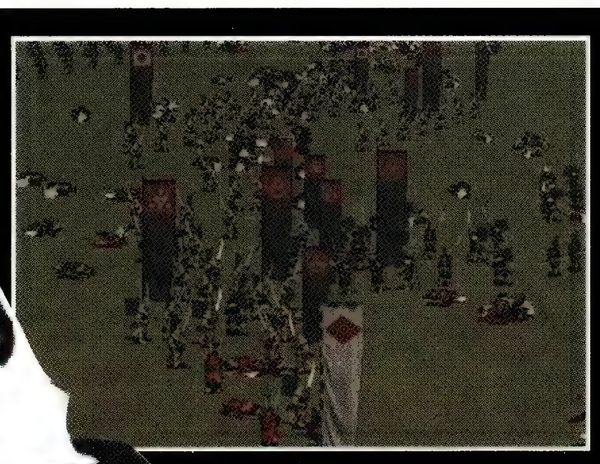
I am becoming increasingly disillusioned with the attitude of developers towards the gaming public. This stems from the increasingly large proportion of games which are released in a far from finished state. Once upon a time you went to your local games emporium, shelled out £30 for a game, and could rest easy in the more or less certain knowledge that you were getting a product which would play as it was intended straight out of the box. No more it seems. Now, with monotonous regularity, I find myself downloading patches and fixes from the web dealing with gameplay issues which should have been sorted before the game reached the shelves.

Surely this must be the only industry where product is released in such a state to consumers. Would you buy a car which came without wheels? A washing machine with no door? I think not. Yet we seem happy to accept this parlous state of affairs. What's your take on the issue?

Dave Spickett, Barry, South Glamorgan

PCSG This is definitely one of the most important issues facing the games industry. The web is being used as an excuse to foist shoddy, substandard product on long suffering gamers.

We here at PCSG will be taking a very strong pro-active stance on this issue. If we get a game which doesn't play out of the box the way it should we'll let you know. If you've got to download a 40Mb patch to sort out, let's say, an AI issue, that'll form a part of the review process and the games overall rating will suffer as a result, no matter how good it appears to be. We'll also be letting the respective software companies know how we feel in relation to this question and we advise you to do the same. If they feel that you, as a gamer, are happy to accept the need for patching as part and parcel of playing games, the situation will continue unchanged. Let them know how you feel and maybe the situation can be altered for the better.



If Creative Assembly's long-awaited Shogun: Total War lives up to expectations, it will take out all challengers

Top left : The calm before the storm
Top centre: No battle plan survives first contact
Top right: A lushly rendered Shogun, for your delectation

Above: The strategic map where you'll foment all sorts of political intrigue
Below: Creative Assembly has come up with some stunning in-game FMV – top eye-candy that also performs a crucial narrative function

SHOGUN: TOTAL WAR
DEVELOPER: Creative Assembly
PUBLISHER: EA
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: March 2000

Shogun: Total War

Shogun: Total War has become a mythical beast, fabled in story and song. Every so often, a half-crazed lunatic will stumble, exhausted and malnourished, into the PCSG offices and report that he has seen it with his very own eyes, and that, contrary to popular rumour, it does enjoy an existence outside of the ethereal realms of PC mag preview and screenshot pages.

Seriously though, we've had innumerable proposed release dates for Creative Assembly's game of strategic warfare in Feudal Japan, avalanches of sumptuous screenshots and tantalising snippets of information. The one thing we don't have is a game. There was a time when we thought Creative Assembly was subjecting us to one of the most vicious, protracted and devious marketing campaigns in gaming history.

So imagine our surprise when some playable code actually dropped onto our doormat, almost as if by magic and without the slightest hint of fanfare or ceremony. We immediately rushed the package to our PC people, hence the demo which adorns this month's most excellent cover disk.

This contains a number of tutorial sequences which should familiarise you with the fundamentals of the game. Shogun is a game of military and political conquest set in Feudal Japan, where you must battle against rival shoguns for supremacy. The game promises two levels of play, a strategic level map where you can plan and execute all types of political intrigue and a real time combat element where vast armies fight it out on the battlefield.

Shogun promises to outdo previous offerings in the RTS arena on a number of fronts. Firstly, the command and control system used in the battle sequences aims at offering an unprecedented level of depth and accuracy. By now we're all familiar with games like Microsoft's recent offering, **Age of Empires II: Age of Kings**, where armies form up into the most wonderful arrays prior to combat only to disintegrate into an unmanageable rabble as soon as combat is joined.

Shogun appears to circumvent this problem rather neatly by implementing an excellent command and control system not unlike that utilised in the Close Combat series. Right click on a unit of cavalry and an orders menu will appear. You can issue all relevant commands here, either for individual units or your entire fighting force.

If you don't want to micro-manage your army, you can issue orders which your entire force will attempt to execute – a central offensive, flank attack on the left etc... If you give your army attack orders your more offensive units like heavy cavalry will automatically form the vanguard. Alternately, if you're feeling less hawkish, you can order a defensive posture and all your heavy units will immediately retire to the rear allowing lighter units such as spearmen to cover them with a skirmishing line.

SCISSORS, PAPER, STONE

It's very important that you understand the inherent strengths and weaknesses of your various units as Shogun utilises a combat system not unlike Scissors, Paper, Stone. Archers will always maul a unit of slow moving spearmen, while if cavalry are to overcome archers they must dart quickly under their arrows. Spearmen who can hold their position will generally emerge victorious from a tussle with cavalry. In combat you can quite quickly ascertain how each unit is faring by holding your mouse over them, to gauge the progress of their current melee, their morale and their physical condition.

In practice this system works brilliantly. It offers an unprecedented level of control over your units on both a micro and macro level. Up until now, the best example of an effective army management system we'd yet seen was that used in EA's Warhammer games. On the strength of this, admittedly rather limited demo, Shogun trumps it completely. The 3D battlefields are nothing short of stunning; the carefully choreographed movements of your armies are nothing short of breathtaking. The beautifully rendered terrain is not just eye candy, it is of crucial importance in battle.

Hold the high ground and you'll gain considerable advantage, while a cavalry charge down a slope will be far more devastating to massed infantry than one across level ground. And your troops will also, quite naturally, become fatigued if they are forced to attack up a slope – which is going to make them far less effective. Woods can also be used to conceal units, which can be then used for a surprise attack, either to bail you out of trouble or cement victory.

Quote

The 3D battlefields are stunning; the carefully choreographed movements of your armies are nothing short of breathtaking

Unquote

However, what we've seen so far is just a tiny component of the game. Will the game really be able to handle the epic battles, which have been one of its major selling points so far? Will the political element of the game be any good, or just window dressing? In short will the overall package mirror the type of quality and polish which the demo has? Time will tell — and time is one thing Creative Assembly seems to think it has an abundance of. We shall see...

Below: The seal of the Shogun, coming soon to a PC near you – we hope!

SUDDEN STRIKE
DEVELOPER: CDV
PUBLISHER: CDV
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: March 2000

Sudden Strike

Military purists stand aside for CDV's high-speed, fast-action knock about WW2 RTS

Imagine a world gone mad. Imagine a world where a German software company launches, of all things, a vast sprawling World War II RTS game. Imagine then, that the game goes on to cock a snook at the po-faced realism which is endemic to the genre and ends up owing more to Command and Conquer than it does to Close Combat.

If you can comfortably visualise such an unlikely scenario, you're not going to have any difficulty dealing with the curious gaming confection that is CDV's **Sudden Strike**. It's the closest you'll get to playing with toy soldiers in a sand box, without causing a stir among the neighbours.

Sudden Strike gives you the opportunity to play the Germans, Brits, Yanks, Russkies or French in a series of campaigns ranged across vast maps, involving – we are reliably informed – up to 1000 units.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

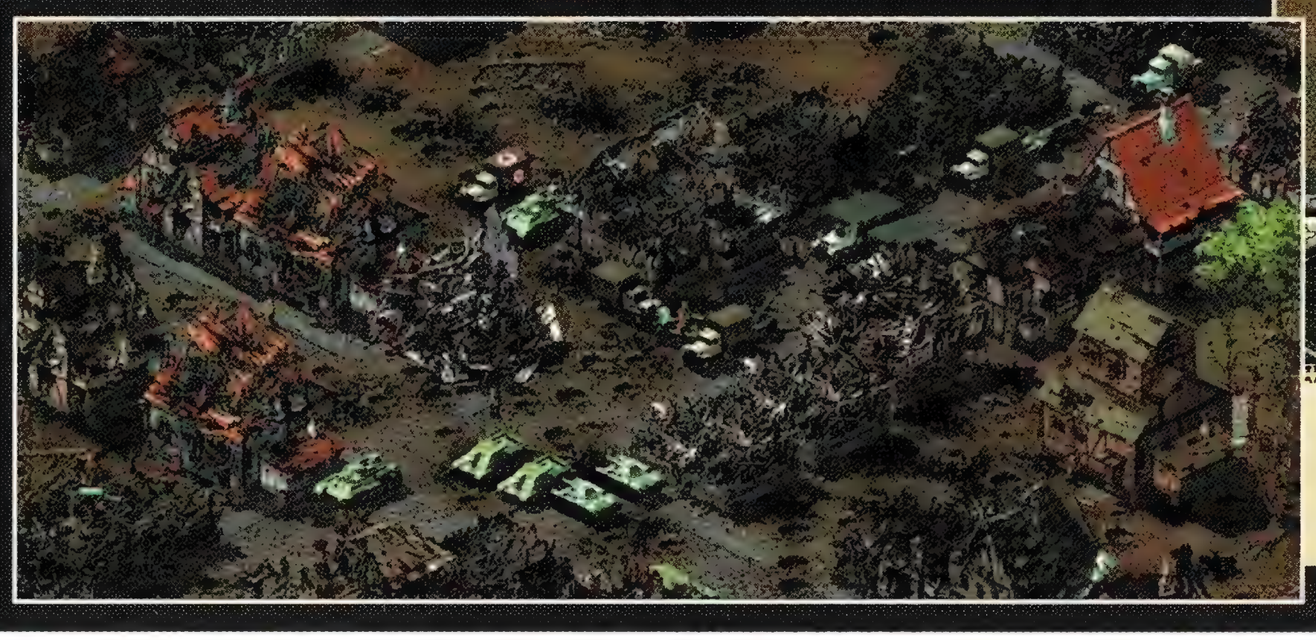
The maps are beautifully rendered; indeed the Teutonic developers of the project have paid considerably more attention to the game environment than is usually the case. As an indication of the lengths to which they were prepared to go, we here in the PCSG office can reliably inform you that there are 40 tree types in the game world, each of which looks different. Impressive indeed. The number of units on show is equally diverse; all are historically accurate, and include tanks, halftracks, trucks and artillery pieces. All the requisite infantry units are present, as is the facility for in-game para drops and airstrikes. Massed battles are very much the order of the day, with large forces of men and armour rushing headlong into the fray.

There appears to be very little room for anything but the most basic tactical or strategic thought and the game is very definitely more a test of your manual dexterity than your mental elasticity. Consequently, Sudden Strike does not play like a hardcore wargame, and any of you expecting something along these lines will no doubt be disappointed. Each unit has a set number of hit points allocated and consequently sustained machine gun fire will eventually knock out even a heavy tank. If, however you can put the military purist in you to one side, this game is an excellent knock-about RTS.

Buildings can be occupied by troops, bridges can be destroyed and rebuilt, mines can be laid and picked up again. If a vehicle unit is damaged but not destroyed, repair trucks can effect running repairs

while any losses amongst tank crews can be replaced from the ranks of your infantry – useful given that infantry can be healed by field ambulances. Tank traps can be laid and all your units, particularly artillery, will have to be kept constantly supplied with ammunition.

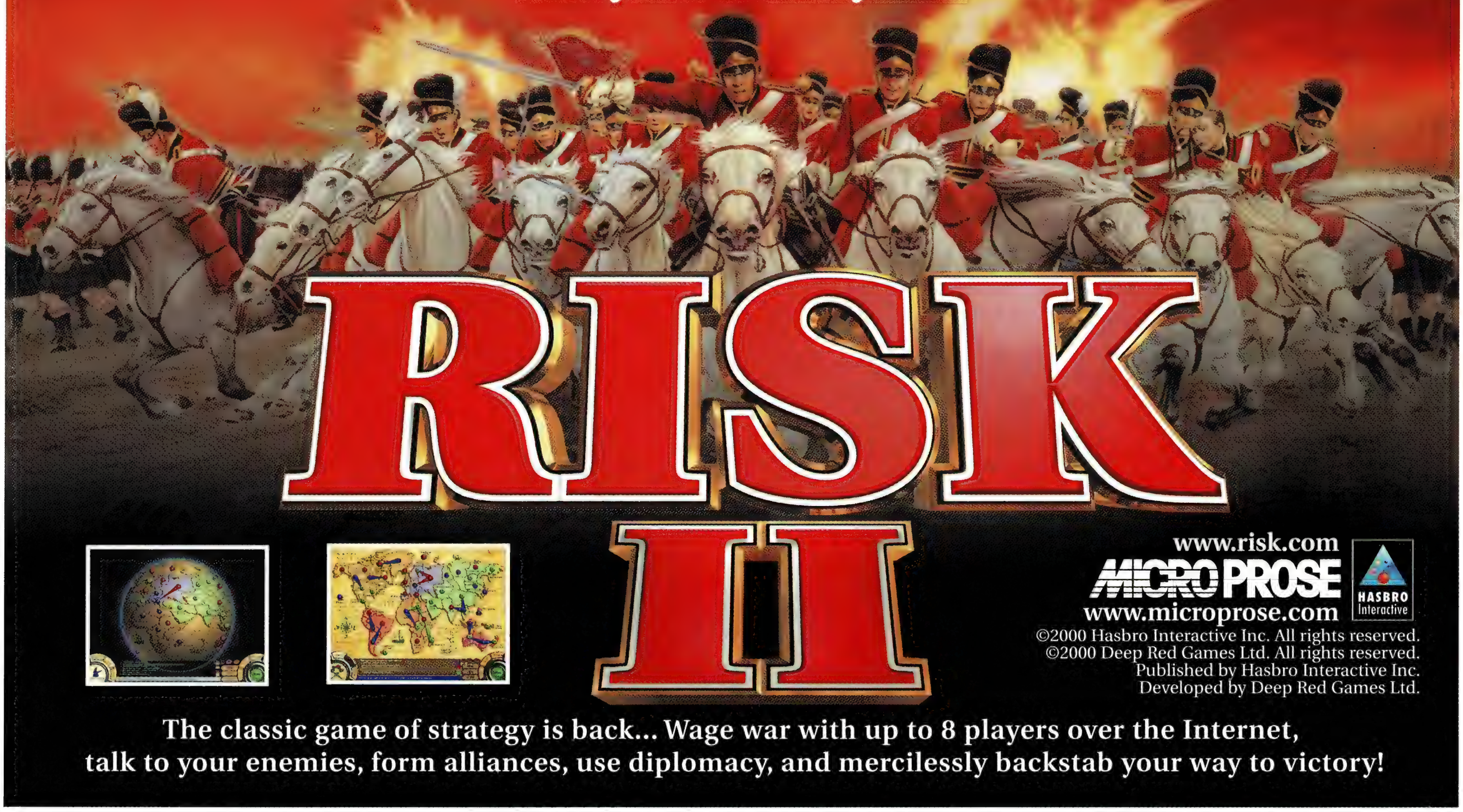
What we've seen so far is fast, furious, frenetic and fun, though it's still obviously not finished yet. However, if the developers can deliver on the promise shown by the demo, Sudden Strike should provide a fun halfway house between the likes of Total Annihilation and Close Combat. But it's definitely not going to be one for the dedicated military historian. PCSG.



Above: Sudden Strike has it all. From pock-marked landscapes and massed rocket barrages to devastating aerial bombardments. What more do you want?

Historys greatest generals didn't wait their turn to attack.

Why should you?



RISK II

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HASBRO Interactive

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The classic game of strategy is back... Wage war with up to 8 players over the Internet, talk to your enemies, form alliances, use diplomacy, and mercilessly backstab your way to victory!

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Airport Inc.

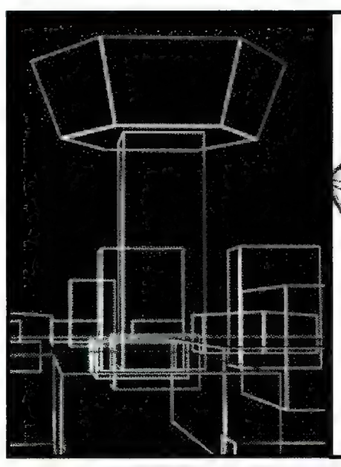
As Airport Inc. gets ready for take off, ***PCSG*** *takes a look at it and discovers a hardcore business sim which allows you to build your own Terminal 5...*

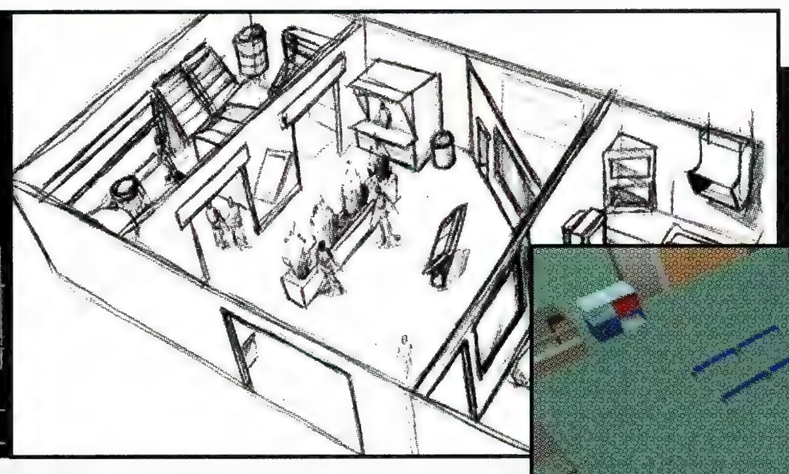
AIRPORT INC.
DEVELOPER: Krisalis
PUBLISHER: Take 2
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: March/April 2000

Freddie Laker – a lightweight. Richard Branson – nothing but an upstart parvenu. Stelios of Easy Jet – silver spoon merchant with too much time on his hands. These guys just run airlines. If they wanted a real challenge, they should try managing airports. Airports are where it's all at.

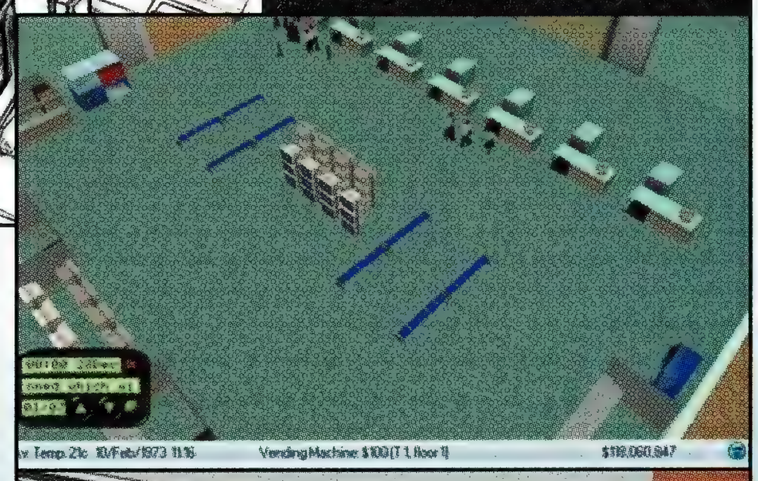
We've all been there, as passengers, anyway – stewing in a check-in queue, surrounded by hordes of over excited 'yoof' barely able to contain their excitement at the prospect of 'doing' Ibiza. Who among us has not said: "This is no way to run an airport – I could do better than this'?

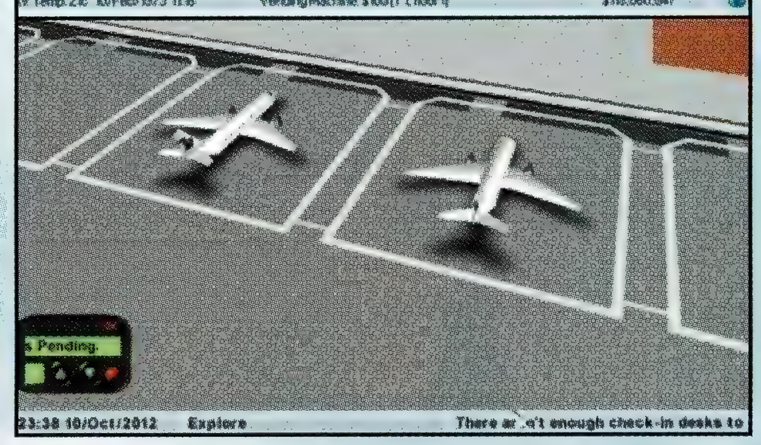
Well, now your chance has come. After all, we've already had practically every other type of business management game imaginable (hospitals, tower blocks, cities – even ant colonies for God's sake). It had to be only a matter of time before someone created an airport management sim – cue Krisalis' Airport Inc.





Left & below: Build your infrastructure from scratch and watch your business take off





Below: I'm Airport Inc., fly me... Who's that passenger slumped in the departure lounge?

A HARDCORE BUSINESS

The first thing you'll notice about Airport Inc. is that it takes itself very, very seriously indeed. There aren't any cutesy cartoony graphics a la Theme Hospital here. In fact, the game veers perilously close to the look and feel of a hardcore business training simulation. It's also very strong on micro-management elements, which will either constitute manna from heaven or death from above, depending on your particular perspective on what makes a good sim-game.

You start completely from scratch, selecting and buying a site, preferably close to a major metropolis to ensure a large customer base. Connect your site to major road and rail links and then lay a runway. You've got varying lengths to choose from, and as with so much in life, the longer the better. Then you'll have to get your terminal sorted. Designing the terminal isn't a matter of slapping down a rectangular shaped building close to the runway and opening the doors, oh no. You have to design the building's interior as well. Check-in desks, retail areas, security arrangements, arrivals and departures all have to be carefully planned. On the runway ensure that the planes have adequate facilities, fire and police services will have to be in place before any airline will consider using your airport. Maintenance and re-fuelling facilities are also required. And if all this weren't enough, you have to consider the threat posed by International terrorism and take steps to ensure that your airport doesn't become a soft target.

Airport Inc. promises to provide a deeply immersing, challenging and authentic Airport management sim – if a little too exacting for some tastes.

METAL FATIGUE
DEVELOPER: Zono Inc
PUBLISHER: GT Interactive
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: March/April 2000

Metal Fatigue

***PCSG** takes a look at the latest in big robot, fight-for-supremacy RTS games – Zono Inc's Metal Fatigue. But is there more to it than just another Manga game?*

Our first reaction upon hearing of Zono Inc's **Metal Fatigue** went something like this: "Oh dear, not another RTS game involving big robots and a desperate fight for supremacy in a hackneyed Sci-Fi futurescape." The very fact that it's an RTS was enough to have us reaching for the cyanide.

Indeed, the RTS field must represent the most over subscribed and cliche-ridden genre in the annals of contemporary computer gaming. It's all been done before hasn't it, with **Command and Conquer, Total Annihilation, Warzone 2100** et al? Surely the last thing the discerning gamer needs is another addition to the already swollen ranks?

And let's face it, in order to make any sort of impact in such exalted company, a new kid on the block is going to have to come up with a completely fresh take on the genre, a whole new perspective on things. But after a couple of hours playing Metal Fatigue, we're happy to report that this could just be the very one to do it.

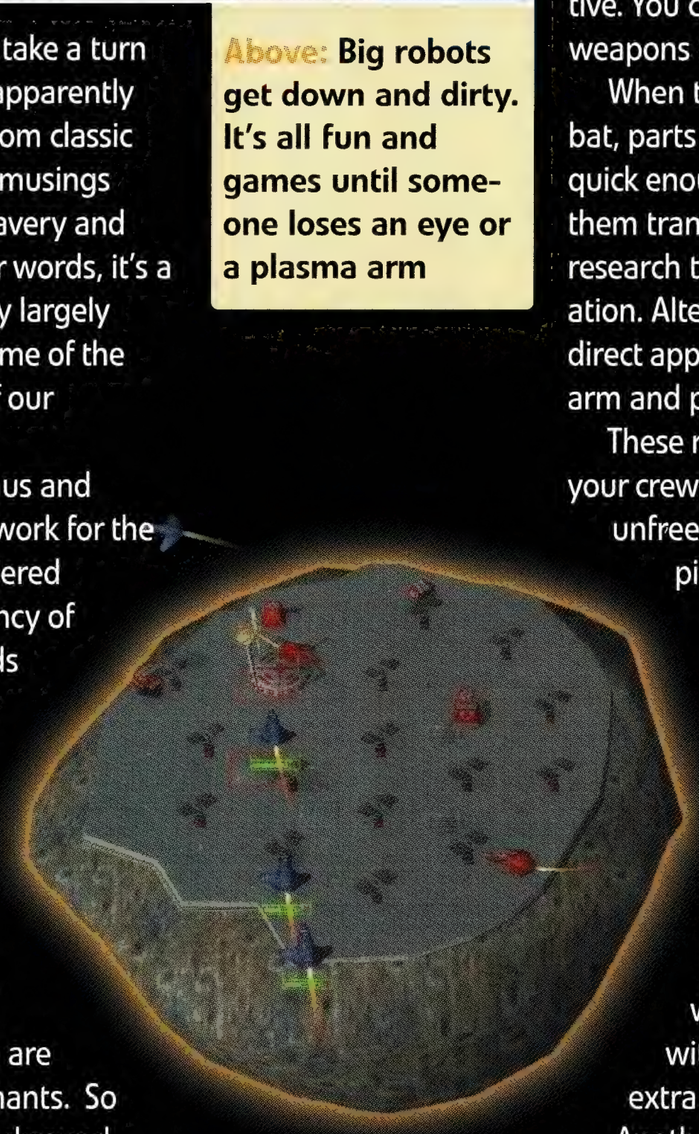
Before we go into details, let's get up to speed on Metal Fatigue's background.

It's the 23rd Century. Mankind has finally discovered the delights of faster than light travel. Naturally we've begun to have a peek at surrounding galaxies – but what we've found doesn't please us at all. It appears that there is a vastly advanced, wildly antagonistic species known as the Hedoth rampaging around, laying waste to sentient life-forms and their associated cultures in a most politically incorrect manner.

GAINING THE EDGE

Intriguingly for Earth's sundry Corpo-Nations (yes, yet another corporatist vision of Earth's future) the Hedoth are leaving scattered pieces of their technology here and there. This advanced technology could provide the competing corporations with the technological and military edge they need to further their expansionist aims in space. So the three largest CorpoNations – Rimtech, MilaAgro and Neuropa – are intent on seeking out the Hedoth, or at the very least the source of their civilisation.

Right and below: Metal Fatigue's beautifully depicted alien landscapes provide a nice backdrop for some no-holds-barred C&C style carnage and mayhem



It's at this point that things take a turn for the bizarre. Metal Fatigue apparently draws a lot of its inspiration from classic Japanese Anime, and is full of musings about loyalty and betrayal, bravery and cowardice. Ahem, yes. In other words, it's a lot of impenetrable and frankly largely irrelevant ranting based on some of the wilder imaginative excesses of our Japanese brethren.

Three brothers – Diego, Jonus and Stefan Angelus– who initially work for the Rimtech corporation, are sundered apart through the malign agency of alien technology and each ends up serving different corporations. It's possible to play each of the corporations, and in classic RTS style, each has its own strengths and weaknesses. Rimtech are the all-rounders, MilAgro are the militaristic, nakedly aggressive types and Neuropa are stealthy, sleight of hand merchants. So apart from the rather florid backround story there appears to be little here to set the game apart from its RTS bedfellows.

Think again – because from the minute you fire the game up, it's obvious that something different is going on here. Firstly, the game adopts a multi-tiered approach. There are three arenas of play.

Above: Big robots get down and dirty. It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye or a plasma arm

Above: Solar panels on your orbital platform will harness the awesome power of the sun to your evil purpose!

You've got your standard surface based action, but you've also got a subterranean theatre of operations and an orbital arena. This multi-layered structure immediately sets the game apart from its peers and also makes for an interesting strategic challenge. Each area demands a different tactical approach and you can build bases in all three.

The basic currency in Metal Fatigue is geothermal energy obtained from vents which can be located both underground or on the surface. Underground energy seams will provide greater energy resources and as such soon become a major source of conflict. But it's quite normal in Metal Fatigue to be zipping frantically between all three views, desperately trying to co-ordinate combat.

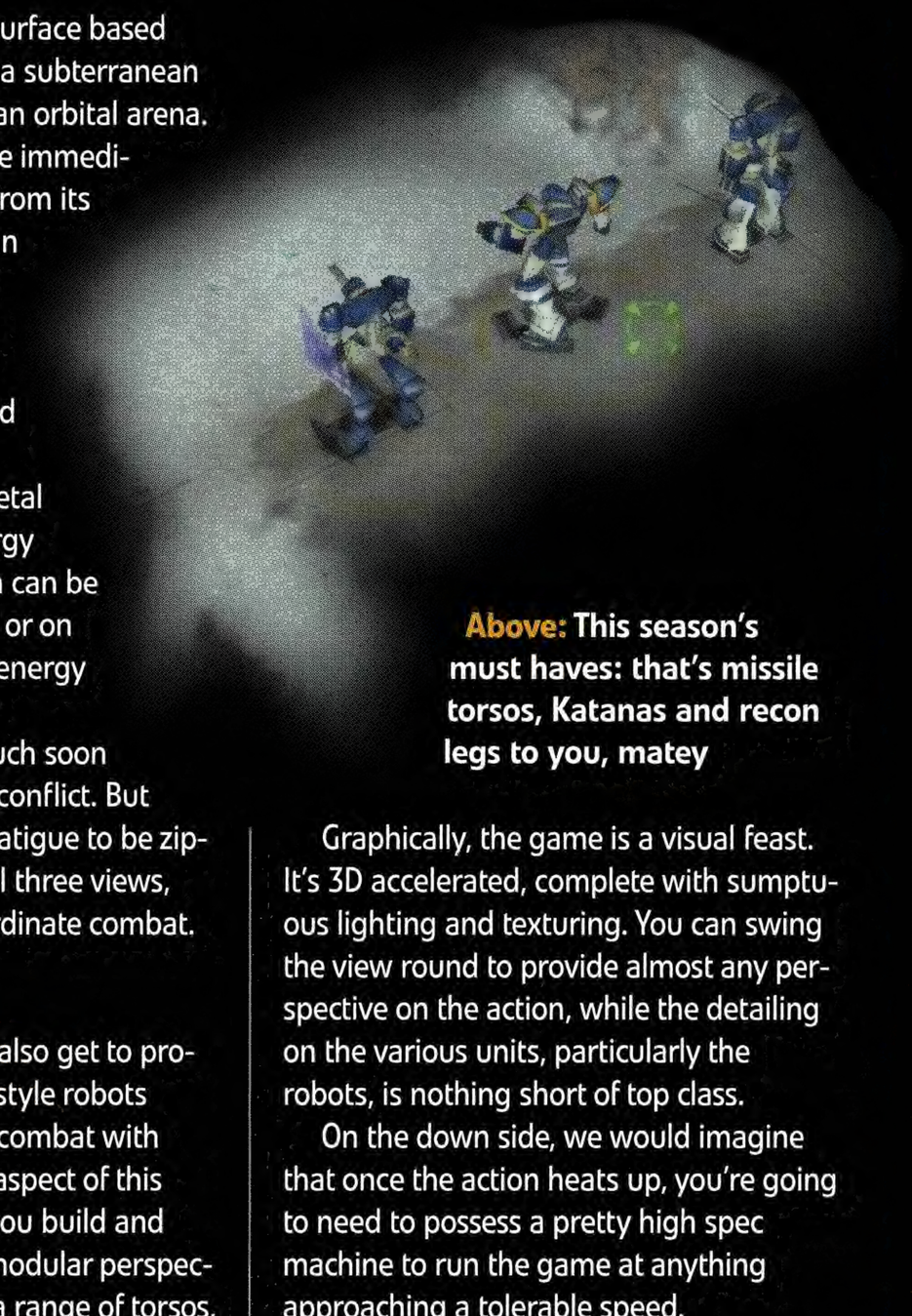
SEIZING LETHAL BODY PARTS

Plus, in Metal Fatigue, you also get to produce huge hulking anime-style robots which can then engage in combat with each other. The intriguing aspect of this facet of game play is that you build and design the robots from a modular perspective. You can choose from a range of torsos, weapons add-ons, leg types etc.

When these leviathans engage in combat, parts tend to fly off – and, if you're quick enough, you can steal them, have them transported back to your base, research them and stick on your next creation. Alternatively, if you prefer a more direct approach, you can simply jettison an arm and pick up somebody else's.

These robots need to be crewed, and your crews live in Cryo huts. Build a robot, unfreeze a crew and send them in to pilot it. If your crew perform well they will acquire experience points which can be parcelled out at the end of each level. A veteran crew will, needless to say, completely annihilate a similar spec robot commanded by a green outfit. Hopefully this element of role playing and level progression will encourage you to identify with your units and perhaps add an extra dimension to gameplay.

Another interesting innovation in Metal Fatigue is the way in which you get to prebuild your base at the start of each level. Instead of having to laboriously scrabble your way up the tech tree again and again, you can ensure that the basic structures are already in place before you start playing the game. Nice.



Above: This season's must haves: that's missile torsos, Katanas and recon legs to you, matey

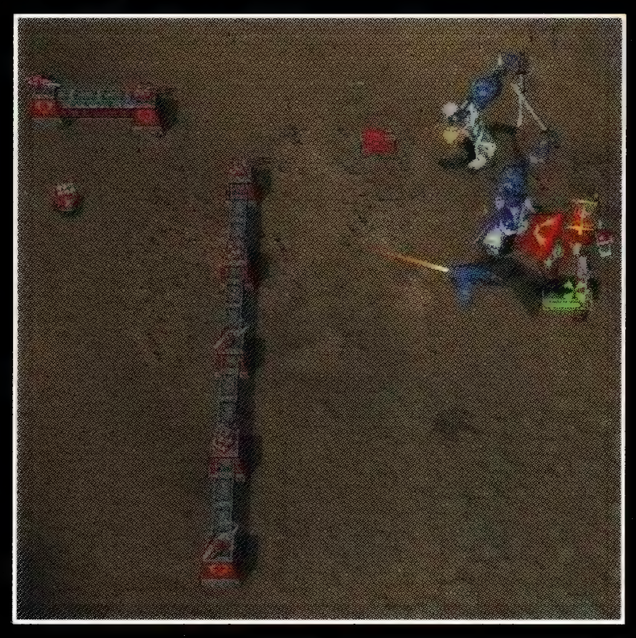
Graphically, the game is a visual feast. It's 3D accelerated, complete with sumptuous lighting and texturing. You can swing the view round to provide almost any perspective on the action, while the detailing on the various units, particularly the robots, is nothing short of top class.

On the down side, we would imagine that once the action heats up, you're going to need to possess a pretty high spec machine to run the game at anything approaching a tolerable speed.

Zono Inc has also made much of the in-game AI. From the preview code we've been fiddling with, though, it's competent, but it certainly hasn't made our pants wanna get up and dance, so to speak.

So, far from being just another run-of-the-mill RTS game, Metal Fatigue promises plenty to lift it well above the mundane. And the fact that the developers have managed to re-invigorate a tired and staid genre by coming up with a fresh approach almost gives us hope for the future of the games industry.

Zono certainly warrant close attention in the future – and PCSG will be bringing you a full in-depth review as soon as we get our hands on something that's close to being finished. PCSG.



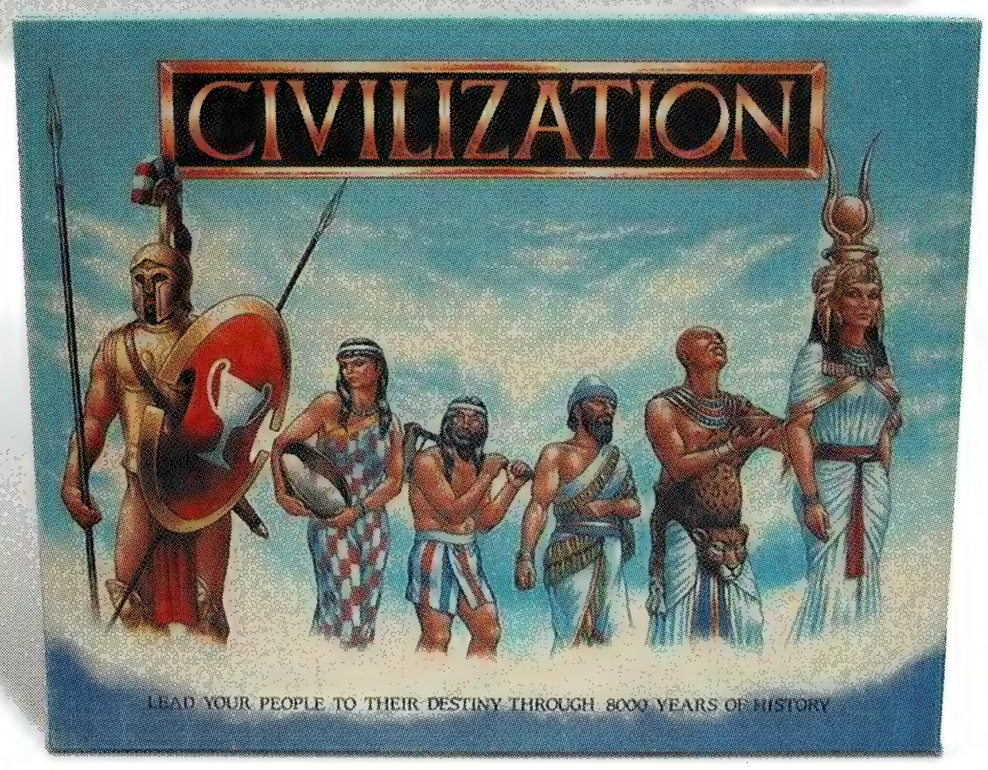
*Strategy games have been around for a lot longer than the PC. **Martin Croft** provides a brief canter through five thousand years of gaming history*

Strategy games past, present and future

PC strategy gamers have never had it so good – believe me, I should know: I've been playing computer strategy games for nearly 20 years. But the future looks even brighter – so long as we don't let games publishers lose sight of the need for titles that continue to provide us with a challenge to what Hercule Poirot used to call 'the little grey cells'.

As Sid Meier points out in our interview with him (see page 34) it's astonishing to think that only 10 years ago, strategy games were regarded by the software industry with the same enthusiasm as educational software. Strategy titles were dismissed as worthy, dull, appealing to a tightly knit niche audience and unlikely ever to sell in the sort of numbers that would make a marketer's career.

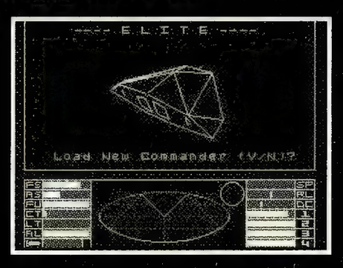
In 1991, Sid's Civilization changed all that; and since then a flood of innovative strategy titles has continued to bring strategy gaming to a wider and wider audience. Putting the word 'strategy' on a game box is no longer considered the kiss of death for sales that it used to be; indeed, so popular has the genre become that marketing whizzkids at many software



Seminal games

ELITE

A mixture of space combat sim and trading game, originally published nearly 20 years ago for the BBC B microcomputer. Still a towering classic which other space combat/trading games are measured against...



CIVILIZATION

The game that nine years ago confirmed Sid Meier's star status and kick-started the rise of the strategy genre. Now Sid and partner Brian Reynolds have settled their differences with original publisher Microprose, Civilization 3 should be with us by 2001...

TOTAL ANNIHILATION

Revolutionised the RTS genre through its sheer scale and complexity.

SIM CITY

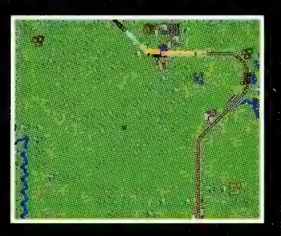
Did for the building game what Railroad Tycoon did for the business game. Made running City Hall something ordinary people could do – who knows, it could put politicians and civil servants out of business.

UFO: ENEMY UNKNOWN

The classic marriage of RTS resource management and TBS tactical planning – renamed for the US market, it became the first game in the X-Com series.

SID MEIER'S RAILROAD TYCOON

A brilliant solution to the fact that business games are seen as boring: sugar-coat the management side with a fun railroad simulation. Everone likes to play with toy trains... The business management sim genre wouldn't exist without it.



Quote

The first wargames rules were published by no less a person than the father of science fiction, H G Wells. His Little Wars, published around 1910, is now regarded as a classic

Unquote

houses have adopted the policy of slapping the word strategy on titles which include nothing of any strategic merit whatsoever.

But while the marketers may have decided that strategy games are no longer as unsexy as educational products, the two genres do still have a lot in common. For one thing, games have been used to train potential warriors and administrators for thousands of years. Chess, for example, has been played in its current form for around a thousand years, while the African game known as Owari or Mancala (or any one of dozens of other names) is probably a thousand years as old again – perhaps more.

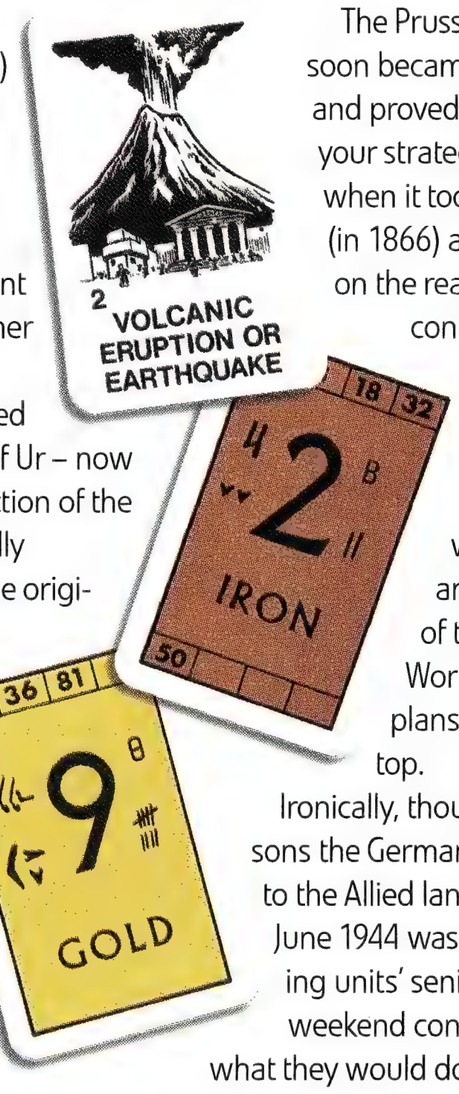
ROYAL GAME OF UR

Excavations at the site of the ancient city of Ur have found, amongst other treasures, an ancient game board and some pieces for an unidentified game – dubbed the Royal Game of Ur – now in the British Museum. A reproduction of the game board, with pieces and totally invented rules (since no copy of the original rules was found with the set) is on sale in the museum's gift shop.

But the current crop of computer games which attempt to amuse or divert through the simulation of real life strategic challenges (rather than using abstractions to teach the underlying concepts behind resource management or warfare) can probably be traced back to 18th Century Prussia, and the development of a military training tool called Kriegspiel. Kriegspiel was the first conscious attempt to create a set of rules for wargaming which took into account the different variables which could affect the outcome of a battle and which could be used to test out various strategic and tactical doctrines.

The Prussian military machine soon became the envy of Europe, and proved the value of testing out your strategies through gaming when it took on the might of Austria (in 1866) and then France (in 1870) on the real battlefield – the latter conflict being used to cement Prussia's domination of a united Germany. The wargames habit stayed with the German military, and many of the triumphs of the First and Second World Wars resulted from plans fine-tuned on the tabletop.

Ironically, though, one of the main reasons the Germans were so slow to react to the Allied landings in Normandy in June 1944 was because all their defending units' senior officers were at a weekend conference, wargaming what they would do in the event of an



Right: Trade cards from the original British boardgame game Civilization

State of strategy games

There's never been a better time to be a devoted follower of strategy gaming. Only a few years ago the words 'strategy' and 'game' in the same sentence were enough to glaze the eyes and churn the stomach, even in strategy fans. But the last year or so has seen the arrival of a veritable avalanche of quality PC strategy titles which represent the cutting edge of games design on any platform.

For the committed gamer, the most gratifying aspect of this phenomenon has been the way in which developers have flirted with convention by mixing and matching game styles to suit their agendas. The cross-genre hybrid has become one of the most successful examples of the new buccaneering spirit permeating the software industry.

For example, Red Storm's Rainbow Six series seamlessly blends elements of the by now ubiquitous First Person Shooter with a squad level tactical command interface. It's spawned a number of equally competent imitators such as Illusion Softwork's Hidden and Dangerous, which transposes the action from modern anti-terrorist operations to World War II.

Empire building games have also taken a massive leap forward. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in GT Interactive's recent Space Opera, Imperium Galactica II (see review, page 46 this issue). On the surface, it's a space based empire building game: but it also contains RTS elements more at home in a game like Command and Conquer and colony construction phases that wouldn't look out of place in SimCity. You've also got to manage economics, not to mention tending to the espionage and diplomatic elements. It's a multi-layered, many faceted gaming experience which pushes out the boundaries of PC strategy.

A game like Homeworld also forces us to re-evaluate many of our assumptions about strategy games – and it does so in a subtly different manner. An achingly beautiful RTS, set in a fully 3D Space environment, it is one of the first truly cinematic gaming experiences.

Traditional wargaming, often viewed as staid, stubborn and deeply conventional has also refused to stand still. A case in point is Atomic's Close Combat series, which has come of age with its last two offerings. But it's the imminent arrival of Creative Assembly's Shogun: Total War that should really set the cat amongst the pigeons.

The future is bright, the future is strategy... **BR**

WARCRAFT

Established the RTS as a legitimate genre.

AGE OF EMPIRES

Microsoft's merger of RTS and civilisation building into a seamless whole really succeeded because of its brilliant graphics and easy-to-use interface.

TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX

The adrenaline rush of the First Person Shooter with the strategic challenge of a squad based tactical combat game. For once, Tom Clancy's

obsession with technical specs for weapons makes sense – you'll find yourself equally obsessive.

DUNGEON KEEPER

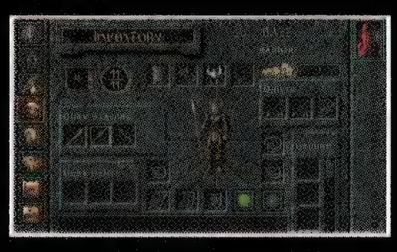
Brilliantly simple idea, superbly executed. Instead of being a hero fighting evil creatures in a dungeon environment, you're the evil creatures' employer, designing and populating a dungeon that'll outfox adventuring heroes. Essentially a business management game where the business is an evil empire. Cult horror, humour and a revolutionary creature-eye view.

HIDDEN & DANGEROUS

The first third person RTS shooter that lets you plan your tactics in real time, rather than when the game is paused or between missions.

BALDUR'S GATE

The game which resurrected the moribund RPG genre, through excellent graphics and a decent plotline.



HOMEWORLD

Stunning 3D graphics and a stunning soundtrack combined to create the first truly immersive computer game. The theme's not original, but who cares that it's a rip-off of Battlestar Galactica?

Ever felt you should be giving something back?

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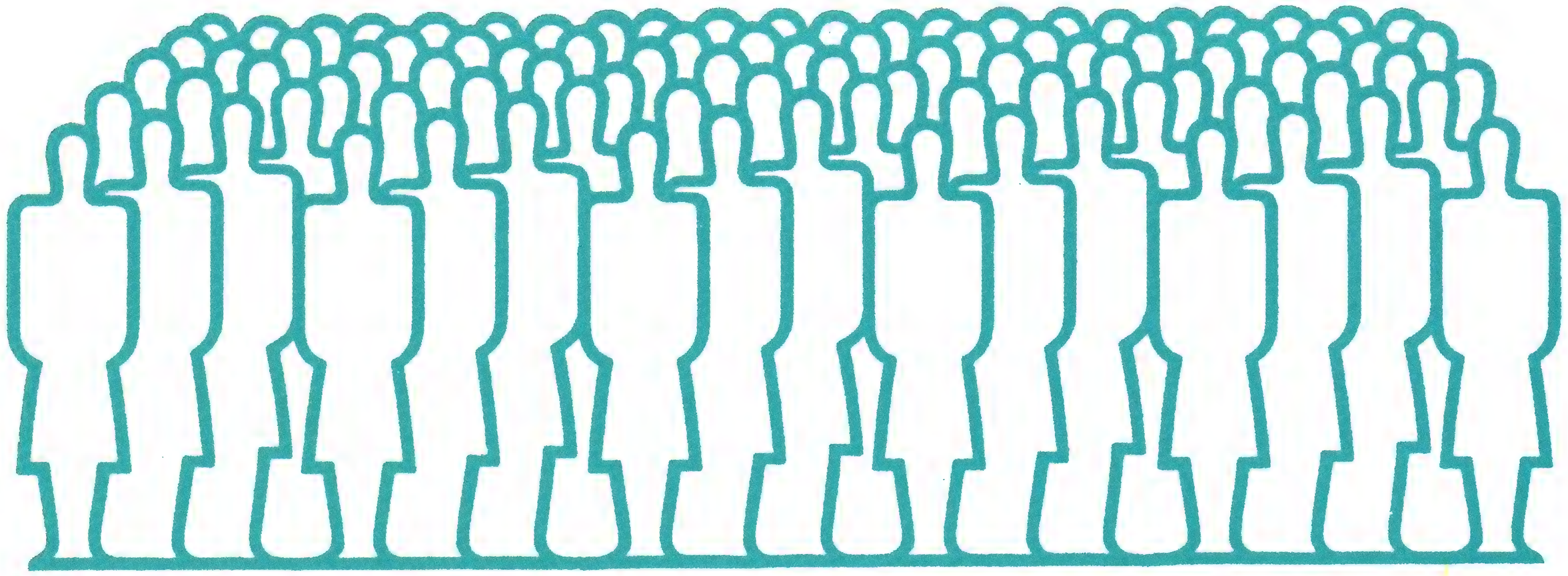
Business Community Connections... promoting strategic business involvement in community causes



Above: Realistic reactions in Theme Park World include upchucking.
Right: 1829 train game tiles

invasion of France. But since the Germans thought the invasion would take place in the Pas de Calais region rather than in Normandy, even if they had finished their game it wouldn't have helped much...

On the non-military side, games had started to become popular as tools for moral instruction since the introduction of printing into Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. But with the Industrial Revolution of the 18th Century came a massive rise in leisure time; by the end of the 19th Century, games that simulated various aspects of everyday life had made the transition from reinforcing moral tracts to helping pass the time for an increasingly large percentage of the population.

PREACHING ABSTINENCE

Indeed, one of the most famous boardgames of all time, Monopoly, actually started life in around 1897 as a game about the evils of alcohol. It is now accepted that the man credited with Monopoly's invention during the Depression of the '30s actually based his game on the earlier one.

In much the same manner and at round about the same time, Prussian Kriegspiel was adapted to provide bored middle-class English men with another way to while away their hours – and the first wargames rules were published by no less a person than the father of science fiction, H G Wells. His Little Wars, published around 1910, is now regarded as a classic. Incidentally, the somewhat left-of-centre Wells did not feel that his game glorified war: rather the reverse – he though it would be a good substitute for the real thing.

Soon afterwards, a number of companies (primarily printing and packaging firms looking to find a profitable use for idle machinery) began publishing strategy games – for example, the UK company Gibson Games released its titles Tri-Tactics, Aviation and Dover Patrol (both based on an earlier French game, Stratego) after the First World War – and the hobby began to enjoy some success. Indeed, Gibson Games (which, now that Waddingtons has been bought by Hasbro and Spears by Mattel, is the longest-surviving British boardgames company) published its games in a number of different formats, ranging from a paper kit version, which purchasers put together themselves, to a deluxe gaming table version with the board set into the wooden top and drawers to keep the pieces in.

After the Second World War, when most people were too busy fighting a real war to worry about pretend ones, the games hobby saw a revival, with the publication around 1960 of classic titles such as Risk (see review of Risk II, page 40) and Diplomacy (see review, page 64).

For wargamers, up until the mid-'70s most serious British gamers preferred to refight battles with toy soldiers; but in America, where the toy soldier industry was less well developed, the concentration was on boardgames and ways to recreate the battlefield using maps and counters. The first games to use a grid of hexagons overlaid on a map as a way of simplifying movement and combat appeared in the US in the '60s, and by the mid-'70s there were a number of firms which specialised in

The future of Artificial Intelligence

According to Arthur C. Clarke's 2001: A Space Odyssey, written in the '60s) we should have HAL-9000 style virtually human computers by 2001. Looking forward from the year 2000, that seems pretty unlikely.

Certainly we've come a long way, with the creation of expert systems and neural networks: but are we ever going to see a truly 'thinking' computer, in the sense that human beings think?

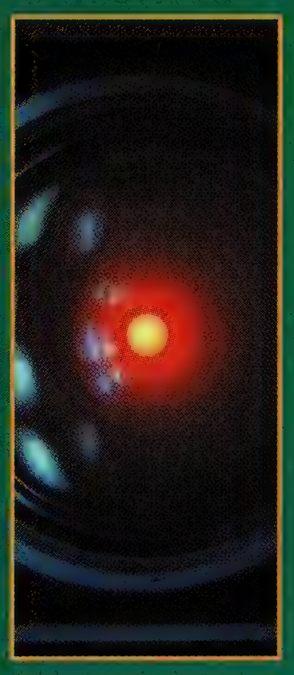
It is widely recognised that the first true electronic computer was built according to the designs of 20th century genius Alan Turing and others to help crack the German Enigma code during the Second World War. Without that machine, cobbled together by post office telephone engineers from spare parts, WW2 would have dragged on for another two or three years. Turing is now best known for the Turing Test, a way of providing a rough judge of how close a computer had come to a simulating the working of the human mind. Someone in one room communicates via a keyboard and teletype machine with an unseen person in another room. They can ask any question they like, and at the end of a set time period they have to decide whether they were communicating with a man or a machine. If a significant number of testers mark the computer as human, the machine has passed.

The trouble with the Turing Test is it is very easy to trick people into thinking that they are dealing with a thinking being when it is actually just a cleverly programmed device. We even do it spontaneously – how often have you found yourself yelling abuse, cajoling or just plain pleading with cash machines or your home computer?

In the early days of computer gaming, the smoke and mirrors used to try to fool us into thinking that computers were brighter than they actually are were highly visible. I still clearly remember my disappointment at an early ZX Spectrum text adventure called The Hobbit which claimed it sported 'genuine artificial intelligence.' In fact, what the game gave you were two characters (Gandalf and Thorin) who wandered about aimlessly.

Nowadays, game producers are more canny. Complex models of human behaviour are used to define the reactions of game AI routines. As a result, the little soldiers in Close Combat IV panic realistically as they spot a Tiger tank rounding a corner. The cartoon children in Theme Park World react with delight to a well-designed roller-coaster and vomit when they use a smelly toilet. Even chess games now come with settings for aggressive, cautious and passive style of opponents. But such 'routines' are not equivalent to intelligence.

I recently saw a preview of Will Wright's new game, The Sims. The player hovers over an isometric neighbourhood, peering into the homes of little computer people. The objective of the game is to influence the lives of a family of these Sims, helping them find jobs, learn about cookery, have affairs with the neighbours – whatever takes your fancy. The interesting point to this is that they will get on with their lives (and may do all of the above) even if you don't tell them to. Your role is more like that of their muse – helping them to live a more ordered and productive life – and the believability of the game depends on the apparent intelligence and realistic reactions of the little Sim people.



Will Wright is proud of the complex AI system he and his team at Maxis have devised, but even he has to admit that the realism of the behavioural reactions is a computer illusion. The action paths are actually in the inanimate objects of the game world and the Sims simply react to whatever object happens to be near them.

For example, the game registers that Mr Sim has not been to the loo for a long time. He will therefore gravitate to the nearest convenience and, on contact, the toilet will impart the routine that makes the Sim lock the door, removes his trousers... and so forth. The same is true of all the other game objects (the team even hope to add a football that contains the routine to cause a group of Sims to play a game). All very clever perhaps, but it's not intelligence — any more than an ant is intelligent for blindly following a scent trail.

"Accurately modelling human behaviour has always been the Holy Grail for a lot of computer scientists," Will Wright told PCSG recently. "We're still a long ways from doing that. I think that the behavioural side [of AI] is what we are going to be going after for the next 10 years."

DW

Quote

D&D proved so phenomenally popular with teenage boys... that other types of gaming simply couldn't compete anymore

Unquote

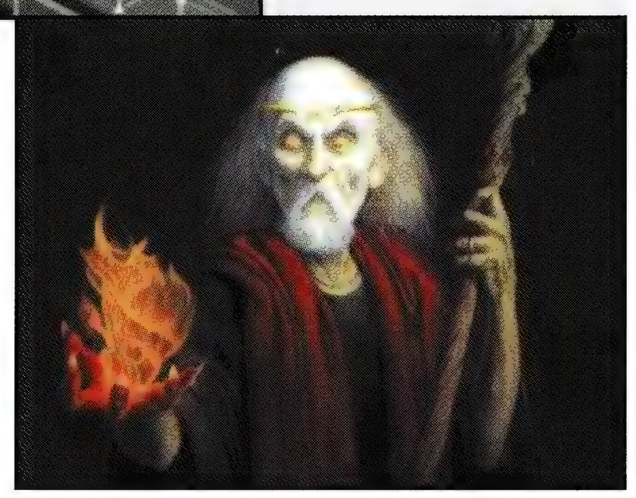
hex-based wargames. The two leading companies in this field were Avalon Hill and Simulations Publications Inc (SPI).

But the mid-70s saw the arrival on the scene of an upstart newcomer which would eclipse traditional table-top gaming and boardgaming alike, and define an entirely new genre of games: Dungeons & Dragons.

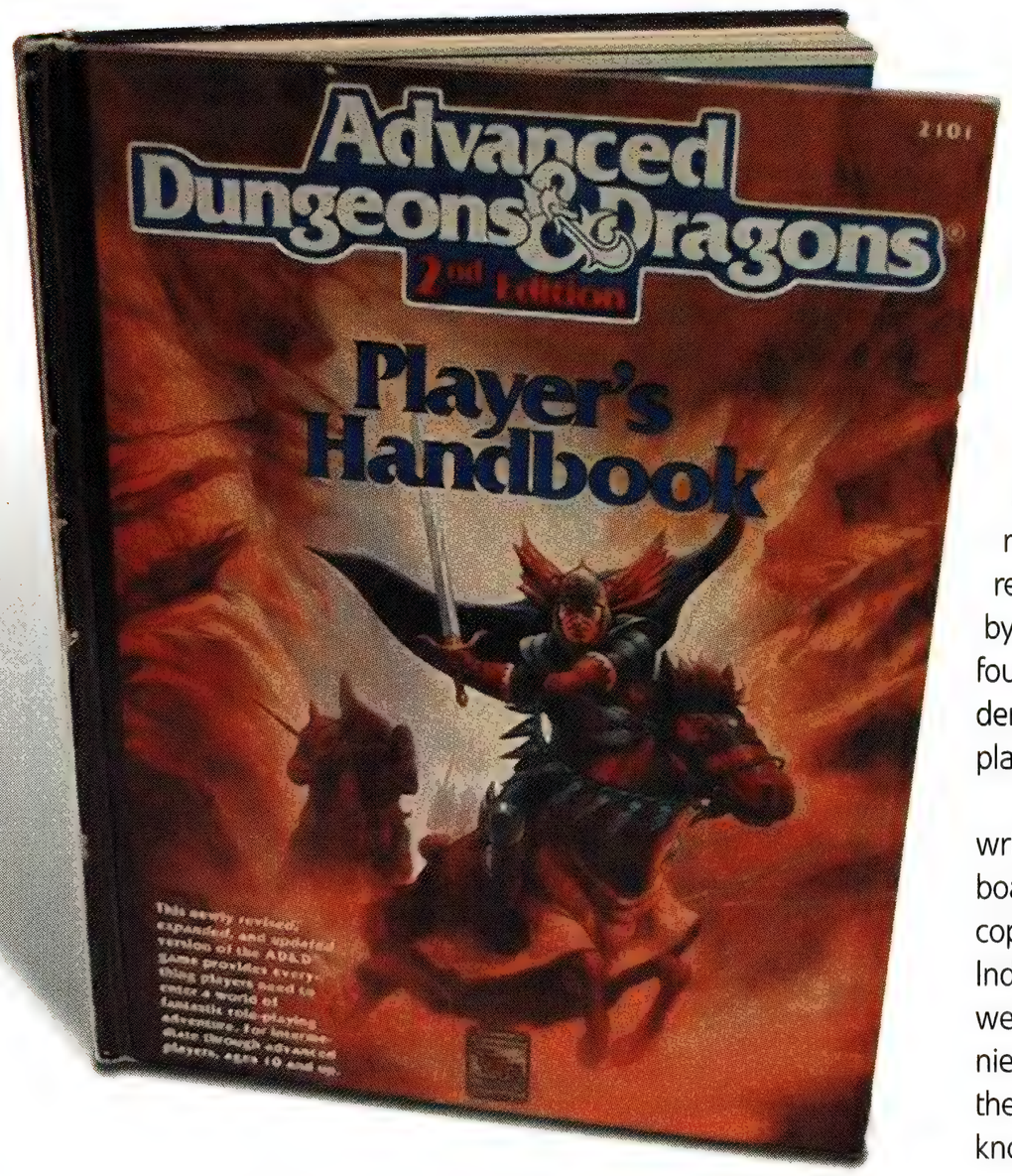
The first Role Playing Game, D&D proved so phenomenally successful with teenage boys, the traditional recruiting ground of the strategy gaming world, that other types of gaming simply couldn't compete anymore.

D&D set the tone for all future successful RPGs. While the gameplay was easily accessible, the complexities of the system led to the creation of an arcane game-related language which suited teenage boys' liking for secrecy. Furthermore, the teenage years are a period of adjustment to impending adulthood, and teens tend to try out many different roles during the period – a game which let them role play was perfect. Then, the magical setting for D&D tied in with an upsurge of interest in fantasy — Tolkien's Lord of the Rings had only really become a success in the late '60s, triggering an explosion of fantasy fiction). Cost was another plus point: while there were enough figurines of different monsters and heroes to buy to satisfy the target audience's collecting mania, D&D could be played without any paraphernalia beyond pen, paper and dice, so entry costs were low. Furthermore, it could be played just about anywhere. Another important factor in the game's success is its social nature. It isn't about beating other players, but co-operating to solve different challenges. And the aim is not to win but to have fun.

Left: Will Wright's The Sims – is it the game that will teach us the strategy for living our lives? Below: TA Kingdoms, an epoch-making game



Below: AD&D, the sequel to D&D, the game that spawned an industry



DEVIL WORSHIP

Finally, the game got up many adults' noses, particularly those of a more conservative and religious bent (the Religious Right in America frequently attacked the game for involving devil worship).

D&D spawned hundreds of imitators, with RPGs appearing that were set in fantasy worlds (Tunnels & Trolls, Runequest), space (Traveller, Space Opera), Arthurian England (Pendragon), Feudal Japan (Rising Sun, Bushido), World War 2 (Behind Enemy Lines), the Wild West (Boot Hill)...

D&D also appeared at around the same time as the first computer games; at first, these were running on university mainframes, but with the home computer revolution – started in a California garage by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, the founders of Apple – people were soon demanding strategy games that they could play in the privacy of their own homes.

Many early computer games were either written by people who had been writing boardgames and RPGs, or were shameless copies of popular non-computer games. Indeed, once the graphics capabilities of PCs were capable of it, board wargames companies began to translate hex-based games for the computer. Indeed, some of the best-known computer strategy games of the last 10 years were created with the help of people who either played RPGs and boardgames or designed them.

Computers offered many advantages for strategy gamers: they could take over the functions of an umpire; they could provide an opponent when a real human one was unavailable; the same game could easily be replayed, so different approaches could be tried; and, of course, later on they provided access to bulletin boards, the Internet and the world of online gaming.

Returning for a moment to our history of strategy games, D&D and other RPGs almost killed off board wargames and table top games, but were themselves then almost killed off by the video console revolution of the 1980s.

More recently, the 1990s saw the rise of the Collectible Card Game, as typified by the most successful product in the genre, Magic: The Gathering. CCGs hit many of the same buttons with teenage boys that RPGs had in the '70s, particularly the collecting mania. But CCGs have been faltering in recent years, facing a challenge from the new breed of console games machines and also PC games.

The company that launched Magic — Wizards of the Coast — was bought by the world's second largest toy and game company, Hasbro, at the end of 1999. Ironically, Wizards itself had earlier bought TSR, the company which had launched D&D in 1974; and TSR in turn had earlier bought SPI, one of the two creators of the board wargames industry in the early '70s. Finally, just before

Christmas, Hasbro also acquired Avalon Hill, SPI's greatest rival.

It's not just in the boardgames field that big companies are snapping up small and medium sized ones: Hasbro also owns computer games publisher Microprose, while the world's biggest toy company, Mattel, through its purchase of The Learning Company, owns Mindscape and SSI.

This domino-effect series of take-overs typifies developments in the games industry over the last 20 years. Increasingly, games companies – whether producing boardgames or computer games – are finding themselves competing not with other games companies but with other leisure pursuits: playing sports, watching TV and films, listening to music.

EATEN BY THE BIGGER FISH

Games companies are having to adapt their business practices, and in particular their marketing style, to take this change into account. Only bigger companies can have the financial muscle to do this – which is why smaller companies have either had to find niche markets which they can dominate, or surrender to bigger ones, either selling up entirely or becoming developers while the bigger companies' act as publishers.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing, although there is an unfortunate tendency for big companies, wary of wasting their big budgets, to avoid any risk – and hence any innovation. On the plus side, though, it does mean that many smaller companies can concentrate on what they do best – producing good games – without having to worry about the distribution and marketing side.

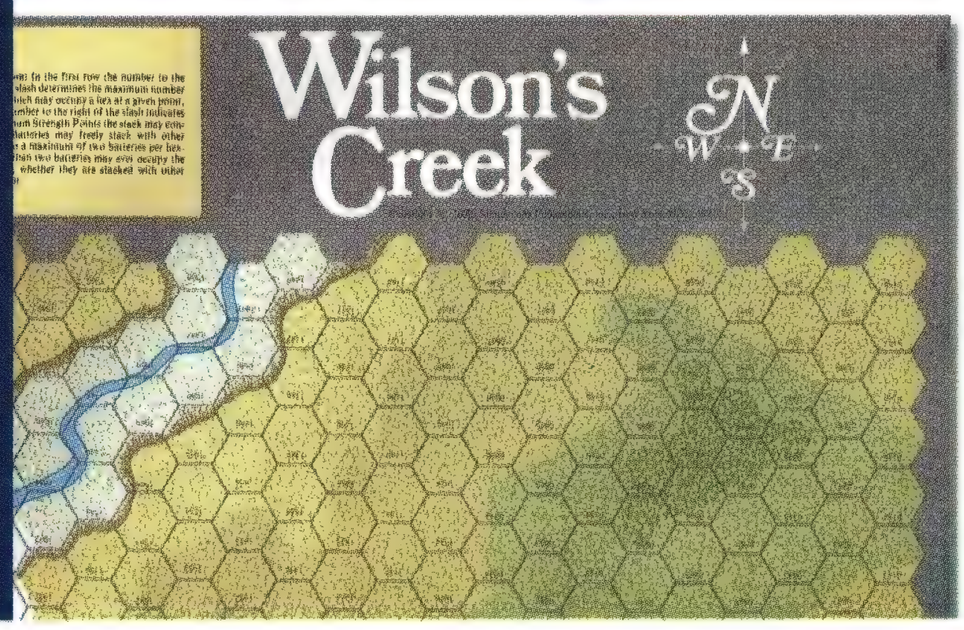
There are also the possibilities of synergy between the different parts of big games companies. For example, Hasbro has now managed to finally resolve the issue of who owns the rights to the name Civilization for a game – it has bought everybody who has any remote claim, including the tiny British games company Hartland Trefoil, which published the original boardgame which inspired Sid Meier to create his magnum opus.

But the future is likely to bring further consolidation: computer games, and boardgames too, are rich sources of ideas which can be translated into other media – after all, we have already seen a number of films based on video games, including Mortal Combat and Super Mario Bros, while Cluedo has also been filmed and D&D turned into an animated TV series. The traffic comes the other way, too: a computer strategy game based on Starship Troopers is planned for release by Hasbro (although it more closely follows the original 1950s book that the 1990s film).

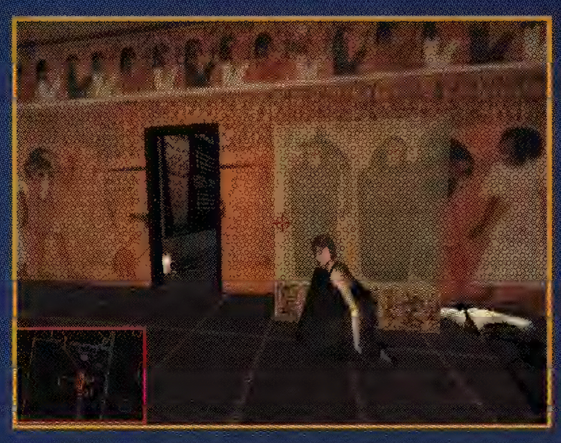
Strategy games can no longer be confused with educational products: they have now become a part of the entertainment mainstream. PCSG.

Above: Magic: The Gathering – the first mega-selling CCG (Collectible Card Game)

Below: SPI's Wilson's Creek, one of its Great Battles of the American Civil War series



Putting the 3D into strategy



More on-screen polygons; higher resolution; faster processor power. Slogans like these adorn the boxes of every new 3D card that comes onto the market, and it seems to having the right effect: a Voodoo 5 is probably somewhere near the top of every serious PC gamer's Christmas list.

But can the same be said of every serious PC strategy gamer? Are we supposedly more cultured players as resistant to the wow-factor of 3D as we claim to be? The success of Homeworld, Dungeon Keeper 2 and Rogue Spear – games that cannot be truly appreciated except in their full 3D glory – would suggest otherwise.

While it's true that most graphical innovations are made in other genres, especially action, the time that it takes for such advances to trickle down to the level of strategy games is becoming shorter and shorter. Newer and better cards are brought out on a regular basis, and it feels as if Microsoft is releasing versions of its DirectX drivers at a rate of one a week.

The days of the bedroom boffin making a small fortune by self-publishing a text-based adventure seem to be long gone. The buying public is impressed by seeing what computers can do at the top end, and the better a game looks, the more chance it has of survival in an increasingly business-orientated market. There's nothing wrong with wanting to aesthetically pleased, but graphics should not take precedent over any other aspect of any given game. Likewise, few people would like the games industry to be entirely visuals-driven.

The fact that strategy games, however, now account for 40% of the UK entertainment software market, a record high, suggests that tastes are becoming more sophisticated – while the games may change on the surface, our reasons for playing remain predominantly the same. Without wishing to flatter our readers too much, the depth of a game is more important to the strategy gamer than relatively superficial details like music and graphics: a pretty interface is a pretty interface, but a well-thought out, challenging game is digital manna from silicon heaven.

What the advent of powerful video cards has done to the strategy game is to revolutionise its approach to realism. While discussions of what constitutes the real are endless, it cannot be denied that the universal demand for a more immersive gaming experience has moved games to a new level of authenticity. Strategy games once relied on an incredible amount of historical fact or enormous databases of figures to appropriate the real. With today's video and sound cards and processing power, programmers can now simulate the physics of real life to stimulate the senses. It's becoming more difficult for the human mind to discern the seam between what's on the screen and what's not.

It may be some way off, but the logical conclusion of such technological progress – according to Moore's Law, computers improve four-fold per dollar year on year – is that future versions of today's video cards and drivers may well power the visuals of the first fully functional Virtual Reality suits that could make the cyberspace described by science fiction writers such as William Gibson (excuse the pun) a reality. MS

El Sid's Civ return

Sid Meier's name has to be one of the most recognised in the computer games industry. Author of a string of top-selling strategy games, he's now working on two giant titles – a game where players control the evolution of dinosaurs, and the official Civilization III. ***Martin Croft*** *caught up with a snow-bound Sid*

Few people expected Sid Meier's Civilization to be the genre-busting game it was – including Sid himself and the rest of the team who developed the game at Microprose.

"In many ways, it did take us by surprise," Sid admits over the phone from a snowy Baltimore, where Firaxis, the company he co-founded with Brian Reynolds (who did much of the development work on Civilization 2), after the pair quit Microprose, is based. "We knew we had something that was fun to play, but we also knew that it was very different to anything that had gone before."

Back in the days before Civilization was launched in 1991, he says, "strategy games were dull and boring. They were a niche product for hardcore wargamers. We certainly didn't expect Civilization to be the breakthrough product it was."

SLEEPER HIT

Nor was Civ's success an overnight one: it took some months of steadily growing sales for Microprose to realise quite what sort of a hit it had on its hands. "It started slowly, and then began to build up – and that was totally in opposition to the usual sales pattern, where a hit game starts well and then tails off."

Sid attributes Civ's success largely to word of mouth – there was very little in the way of marketing support for the original game. Obviously, the title appealed to something in the mass gaming audience that games publishers hadn't even realised existed: the desire to overcome an almost purely intellectual challenge, rather than one which required hand-eye co-ordination.

Also, Sid believes, the coherence of the design had a major role to play in the game's success. In his opinion, "a good game is one where you can tell what the designer was trying to do."

There's one issue we'd better clear up before we go any further – the matter of Sid's ego. After all, all his games have 'Sid Meier's...' slapped before their titles, even when, as with Civilization II, Sid's involvement wasn't as large as with the original Civilization or with Railroad Tycoon.

Sid's name had to go up front on Civ not because he has a massive ego, but because he was a significant box office draw already (an earlier flight sim had been a best-seller for Microprose, as had Railroad Tycoon) – and for legal reasons. There already was a game called Civilization, published by the specialist boardgames company Avalon Hill, and there were concerns about possible confusion – particularly since Avalon Hill had its own computer software arm and had plans to publish a computer version of its own title. Hence 'Sid Meier's Civilization', to differentiate it from Avalon Hill's Civilization.

Sid is happy to admit, incidentally, that he had played the original Civilization and that it was certainly one of the inspirations for his computer game. He also borrowed the concept of civilisation advances from the original boardgame, which was written by a slightly eccentric English games designer, Francis Tresham, and published by his company, Hartland Trefoil, which licensed it to Avalon Hill for the US.

Francis Tresham also created the railway game 1829, which Avalon Hill also licensed, albeit with some radical alterations to the rules and a new name, 1830. Sid also acknowledges that 1830 was one of the inspirations for Railroad Tycoon.

Nor was the dispute with Avalon Hill the only legal wrangling over the name Civilization. Somehow, Activision managed to get hold of the right to use the Civilization name for a game, hence the launch a couple of years ago of Civilization: Call to Power. CTP came out almost simultaneously with Microprose's Civilization 2: Test of Time, which was basically the original Civ 2 with the previously published expansion packs and scenario disks added in.

Above: Sid's progress – few game designers have produced as many best-sellers as Sid Meier: Colonization, Railroad Tycoon, Civilization and Pirates, to name only some

Quote

We'd never lost interest [in Civ 3] but until Microprose had settled down again, we got on with Alpha Centauri and Gettysburg

Unquote

Confused? You'd have a right to be. But it's all settled now – mainly because giant US toy company Hasbro, which bought Microprose, then proceeded to buy both Avalon Hill and Hartland Trefoil, to cement its control over the title.

And, in fact, it was the success of Hasbro's cheque book offensive that last year resulted in Sid and Brian agreeing to work with Microprose on the development of Civilization 3, which has to be one of the most eagerly awaited computer games in history.

Sid and Brian had watched the legal wrangles between Microprose and

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Activision over the rights to the Civ name, and the various take-overs that were occurring, with interest. The legal disputes were 'kind of funny but also kind of sad, because it put things [a possible Civilization 3] pretty much on hold'.

One of the benefits of Hasbro's take-over of Microprose was the return to Microprose of Tony Parks, who had worked with Sid an Brian on the original Civ. "His appointment meant it made sense to put the process [of discussing terms for Civ 3] back together again. We'd never lost interest, but until Microprose had settled down again, we got on with Alpha Centauri and Gettysburg."

Sid isn't saying much about what's likely to be in Civ 3, but he does admit that one of the things being considered is whether to make the real time game or turn-based game. Judging from some of his comments about the project, Firaxis may be considering some mingling of the two, an approach the company has already tried out with its American Civil War games, Gettysburg and Antietam.

THE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION

Sid does say, however, that he and Brian want to make the new game accessible to those who haven't played Civilization or any of its sequels, while still maintaining interest for those who have.

"Obviously, when we're designing Civilization 3, we have to bear in mind the history of Civilization and the kind of people who like to play it," he says. "And they're not shy about coming forward with ideas, either – we've got a notebook filled with ideas that's several inches thick."

But before there's any chance of seeing Sid Meier's Civilization 3, Firaxis has to finish its current project – a monster of a game, which seems to be going under the working title of Sid Meier's Dinosaurs. It's going to be a strategy game in which instead of controlling human civilisations seeking to rule the earth, players determine the destiny of dinosaur species seeking to avoid extinction.

And Sid also has ambitious plans to link the dinosaur game with Civilization 3 and Alpha Centauri, the Civilization-like game already published by Firaxis (which many Sid fans claim would have been called Civ 3, if Sid had had the rights to use the name).

"We have been talking about a concept we're calling 'the sweep of time', which would link the three projects together," he confirms. "What you do in one game would influence what happens at the start of the next." The idea is apparently that once you've finished Dinosaurs, you'll have a saved game file with information which you will be able to load into Civ 3, and the same with Civ 3 and Alpha Centauri.

Sid unplugged

WHO DOES SID ADMIRE?

"Those guys at Blizzard – they've done a series of really high-quality games. Chris Sawyer, who designed RollerCoaster Tycoon and Transport Tycoon. The guys at Ensemble who did Age of Empires."

WHAT GAMES IS SID PLAYING?

"Rollercoaster Tycoon and Age of Empires. With my son, Lego Racers and StarCraft. We're not playing anything online at the moment, but we do link up our machines and play multiplayer."

WHAT IS SID READING RIGHT NOW?

"Mountain climbing books, sailing, any new history books (particularly American Civil War), popular science."

HOW DOES SID RELAX?

"I've got two hobbies. Reading and absorbing the world through TV and books is one, and the other is music. I play the piano – I like classical music in particular – and for the last four or five years I've been writing music myself. I'd always dabbled with music, but a while ago I decided that I was going to take it much more seriously, so I studied as much music theory as I could."

The only other thing that Sid would say about Dinosaurs is that "the tone of the game is going to be plausible – it's not going to be science fiction or fantasy. It'll be a kind of 'what would have happened if...?'"

As Sid about what he thinks of Civilization 2: Test of Time, which was cobbled together from the original game and add-on packs, and you discover that he can be something of a diplomat. "It's probably not the way I would have done it, but that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with it," he says.

But then, he admits to having something of a problem with sequels – "I very seldom return to genres that I have done" – although he is looking forward to working on Civ 3.

Above: Sid's deep interest in history shines through in his Gettysburg, which marries RTS and turn-based

He believes that games genres tend to move in cycles. First, there's the breakthrough game that establishes the genre, which is often quite crude in execution although usually revolutionary in concept ("Civ was like that," he admits. "The graphics weren't that good.") Then you get basically the same idea, but packaged and sophisticated – like Microprose's Civilization 2, which had far superior graphics and gameplay to the original. Finally, the third phase, where there is "too much sophistication and not enough content. There's a lot of polishing, and a lot of adding more of the same, but maybe not enough real extra value."

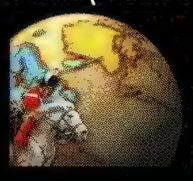
Given that Sid is now working on Civ 3, let's hope he bears his own dictum in mind and produces a content-filled package (although given his track record we're probably pretty safe).

So once Sid Meier's Civilization 3 is out of the way, what can we expect to see next? "There's a lot of life that we haven't really explored yet with computer games, because it doesn't involve explosions and heads being cut off. I've always thought it would be neat to have a game based on the way the human body defends itself against disease – white corpuscles rushing down the bloodstream to the rescue, like the cavalry. It'd be an interesting idea – I see it providing the same sort of challenge that something like SimCity does."

Hmmm... Sid Meier's Human Body? Sid Meier's Body Zone? Sid Meier's Body Management? Or even Sid Meier's Theme Body? None of them sound like a sure-fire winner. But then, even Sid didn't expect Civ to be a winner, so who knows? PCSG

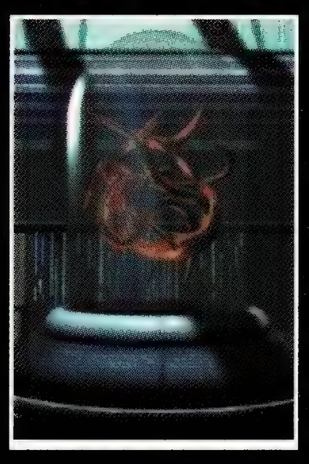
Reviewed in this issue:

Risk II (*Hasbro Interactive*) 40
Imperium Galactica (*GT Interactive*) 46
Close Combat IV: Battle of the Bulge 52



Reviews Policy

We will be devoting serious time, space and energy to reviewing the strategy games that matter, so you can make the best choices for you. What we say will be in-depth and independent...



The editorial team at PC Strategy Games is passionate about strategy games – those titles where you have to think about the situation you're in, assess the resources available to you and then plan what you're going to do to achieve whatever the objectives are.

Because we are only covering the strategy genre, we are able to devote more time and more space to in-depth reviews of the latest titles in the area. As you will see from the following pages, if we think a game is worth reviewing, then it will not be covered in less than two pages – and a major new game will get between four and eight pages of coverage.

We believe that a game that's taken 18 months or more to develop deserves better than to be reviewed by someone who looks at it for only 45 minutes. So when we review a game, three of our team will look at it and provide independent – and equally weighted — opinions, with a score out of 10. These scores will then be averaged to provide an overall score for the game.

In addition, we'll also provide separate ratings for a wide range of factors, which contribute to the game experience – including graphics, sound, AI, technical support...

We'll also test it out multiplayer, if there's a multiplayer facility. Wherever possible, we'll try all the scenarios and missions. We'll read the manual, cover to cover. We'll look at the website and other online support. We'll talk to the development team and them why they made this game the way it is. We'll go back and load up games we think are similar, either in terms of style of play, historical setting or theme.

In fact, we'll do everything except jump on the box to make sure that the game delivers on its promise. And if the box looks particularly flimsy, then we might just do that, too.

We won't review games that we think aren't finished, or close to finished – and if that means that our coverage of some games appears after that of rival magazines, then so be it: we'd rather be behind the times but accurate, than jump the gun and get it wrong.

Finally, we will never trade editorial coverage for advertising space or exclusivity. We think you're intelligent enough to recognise when a bad game gets high scores because the publisher has spent large amounts on advertising. That's not to say that you're always going to agree with our reviews, or that we are never going to change our minds – but you can rest assured that the opinions we express will always be independent.

If you don't agree with something that we say about a game - or even if you do - then we'd like to hear from you. You can e-mail the editor at martinc@crimsonpublishing.co.uk.

PCSG Reviews Panel

Martin Croft has been a war gamer, board gamer and role playing gamer for 30 years, the last 15 on computers. After an expensive and useless education (including an MA in watching movies), he joined a computer magazine at the start of the Sinclair Spectrum era. He has written extensively about board and computer games, and was for the last three years strategy games editor of a leading PC games magazine.

Favourite PC strategy game:
Master of Orion II

Damon Wilson has written and edited non-fiction books for the past 12 years. To his embarrassment, the vast majority of his oeuvre is concerned with murder and serial killers, the paranormal and out-of-this-world experiences, espionage, lost civilizations and prophecy (his last book was The Mammoth Book of Nostradamus and Other Prophets). Sometimes, computer games have been the only sane thing in his life...

Favourite PC strategy game:
UFO: Enemy Unknown

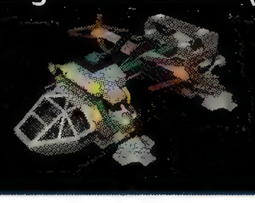
Barry Ryan has degrees in archaeology and post-colonial literature, and for the last few years has spent his spare time – when not playing computer games – scrabbling about in Irish peat bogs in search of ancient Celtic remains. A childhood spent casting his own lead Napoleonic soldiers has left him with a love of computer wargames and military history, and a severe case of lead poisoning.

Favourite PC strategy game:
Rogue Spear

Mark Shaw (not the singer from the mid-1980s one-hit wonder Then Jericho) is an expert on noodle music, databases, and friendly fire incidents. He has co-written, co-edited, directed and produced at least one (20 minute) movie, so considers himself well-qualified to comment on FMVs. When not shooting his colleagues in the back 'by accident', he relaxes with management sims.

Favourite PC strategy game:
SimCity 2000

Sid Meier's Alien Crossfire (*Firaxis*) 58
Diplomacy (*Hasbro Interactive*) 66
Tzar: Burden of the Crown (*Zablac*) 68
Lego Rock Raiders (*Lego Media*) 72



The PCSG Scoring System

THERE ARE TWO ELEMENTS TO THE PCSG SCORING SYSTEM

First, every game is given a score out of 10 by each of the three reviewers. These individual scores can be found at the top of the comments boxes. An overall score out of 10 is then calculated by averaging the three reviewers scores and then rounding to the nearest half point. This is the score out of 10 which appears in the 'Verdict' box printed at the end of each review.

Because we have three reviewers, games are unlikely to receive very high or very low final scores. A score of 10/10 will be almost impossible to achieve, while 9/10 should be considered a very high score indeed.

We've also added a simple thumbs up or thumbs down icon, to give you an instant idea of what we thought of each title.

Also in the verdict box you will find a series of 'thermometers' which indicate how our reviewers rated the game on particular aspects (which are explained more fully below). These scores do not contribute to the overall score, they are merely a visual device to help the reader grasp quickly the main plus and minus points of each game. In almost all cases, the further to the right the red line extends, the better.

EXPLANATION OF THE CATEGORIES

Graphics – the look of the game, from cut scenes and full motion videos through management screens to the details of the terrain and individual units.
Sound f/x – specifically the in-game sound effects.
Music – any music which is featured, whether it is in-game or whether it plays during intro sequences, loading sequences, FMVs etc.
Challenge – how hard the game is to play, in terms of the tasks which the player has to achieve.
Realism – how authentic is the game to real life (or, in the case of games set in fantasy or science fiction worlds, how immersive is the gameplay).
Complexity – how easy is it to learn how to play the game. Is there a good tutorial, does the manual clearly set things out, is there a decent help facility?
Interface – how easy is it to actually play the game, in terms of moving through information screens and giving orders. Is the information presented clearly? Also covers the amount of mouse and/or keyboard work required.
Multiplay – what's the multiplay experience like? How many people can get involved at once, and how easy is it for them to link up?
Gameplay – just how much fun is it to play?
AI – how do computer-controlled opponents rate? Are they predictable and easy to beat, or can they surprise a human player? Also covers 'autopilot' settings which allow a player to, for example, leave cities with orders to build defensively or offensively.

Ian Delaney works full time for another magazine, writing about the wonderful world of laptops and hand-held computers. Proud owner of a Sinclair Spectrum as a child, he dropped out of computer gaming until the day, 10 years ago, when he had to buy a computer for working at home. At the end of a hard day, he enjoys nothing more than playing those games no one else on the PCSG team wants to review. Thanks to such low expectations of reality, god sims rule his fantasy life.
Favourite PC strategy game:
Syndicate

Having spent three years studying rocks, Austin Parsons then put his skills to use in the computer games industry. In 1997, he started work as a quality assurance tester for a well-known UK manufacturer of strategy games. A keen strategist, he also likes first person shooters and driving games. Since the beginning of 1999, he has worked on developing websites and, more recently, on sourcing demos and patches for our most excellent cover CD.
Least favourite PC strategy game:
Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun

Definitions

AI. Artificial Intelligence. Software routines designed to mimic the human decision making process. Used to provide computer-controlled opponents in games. The better the AI, the better the illusion that you are matching wits with a real person.

Building game. A game in which the player takes responsibility for creating and maintaining a social structure – anything from a single building to an amusement park to an entire city and keeping the inhabitants as happy as possible, eg SimCity, the Caesar series, Pharaoh.

Business game. A game which simulates running a business, eg Monte Christo's StartUp, Hasbro Interactive's Rollercoaster Tycoon.

Classic game. A PC version of an existing board or card game, such as Chess, Bridge, Monopoly or Risk.

FMV (Full Motion Video). Cinematic sequences used as introductions to games and to scenarios/missions within games, and as ways to communicate plot developments to players.

FPS (First Person Shooter). A game in which the player controls the actions of a single individual at any one time, and sees what that individual sees (in other words, a first person perspective). More often associated with action games, there are a number of titles which are combination FPS and strategy games, such as Red Storm's Rogue Spear or Sierra's SWAT 3.

God game. A game in which the player assumes god-like powers, usually to guide a tribe or race to world-domination, eg Lionhead's Black and White, Bullfrog's Populous.

Hex-based. A game which uses a hexagon grid as a map overlay to facilitate movement and combat. Derived from paper-based board wargames. Many computer wargames use hex-grids, although the grid is not always visible, eg SSI's Panzer General 3D, Talonsoft's Battleground series.

Isometric view. A game in which the player sees the map or playing area from above, but with all parallel lines remaining parallel (in other words, a view that does not use perspective). Examples include Microprose's Sid Meier's Civilisation 2, Firaxis' Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri, Eidos' Commandos.

RPG (First Person Shooter). A game in which the player controls an individual character rather than an entire army. Usually, RPGs feature a series of linked scenarios or adventures, and there will be some element of progression, in that characters can 'learn', with abilities improving over time. eg Interplay's Baldur's Gate, Blizzard's Diablo, Eidos' System Shock 2.

RTS (Real Time Strategy). In RTS games, players have to make decisions and give orders in 'real time', and units then attempt to carry out those orders. In a sense, time becomes another resource to be managed. eg Westwood's Dune 2 and Command & Conquer.

Turn-based strategy. In turn-based games, players are able to plan strategies and give orders to units outside of 'real time'. Once all orders are given, they will then be carried out. eg Microprose's Sid Meier's Civilization, Star Trek: Birth of the Federation and Master of Orion 2: Battle at Antares.

DEVELOPER: DEEP RED GAMES **PUBLISHER:** MICROPROSE

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Pentium 166MHz • Win 95/98 • 4X CD-ROM • 32Mb RAM • 60Mb Hard Drive • 2Mb SVGA video card • Direct Sound compatible sound card • Direct X version 6.1 • Supports keyboard and mouse

Risk II

Those developing such a classic 40-year-old boardgame for the PC face a tricky balancing act: to keep the new player gripped while satisfying diehard fans. As ***Damon Wilson*** *explains, Risk II confounds the critics and should keep everyone happy*

Who can honestly claim that they have not, at some stage, been exposed to the charms of the **Risk** boardgame? The instantly accessible and easily understandable gameplay system, and the even simpler objective – conquer the world – have made Hasbro's 40-year-old classic a perennial favourite with families looking for something to entertain young-ish children, and groups of young men after a session down the pub. It's incredibly successful, instantly recognisable and, like all great games, beautiful in its simplicity.

But there's also a surprisingly large amount of strategic thinking and planning involved in the game – and the latest computer version to hit the stores adds even more.

I say the latest computer version because this is in fact the second attempt to put Risk on the PC. The first version of Risk, developed in-house by Hasbro Interactive's own team, was something of a turkey. It was bugged, the interface was muddy and innovations such as the European, American or African conquest maps were not well received by Risk fans.

Paradoxically, the developers' attempt to add to the gaming experience by putting in variant maps was extremely unpopular: the team had failed to recognise that providing a map of Europe to play Risk on, rather than a map of the world, changed the basic nature of the game – it wasn't 'The Game of World Conquest' anymore. Meddle with sacred cows at your peril, Hasbro.

Despite the complaints from dedicated boardgamers, the first PC Risk managed to sell a million units around the world. And now, Hasbro has decided that the time is right for another stab at the classic. And who have they chosen to carry the flag? The Milton Keynes-based development team Deep Red – set up by the very people who were in charge of the in-house development team that came up with the original PC Risk at Hasbro.

Converting boardgames onto the PC is neither easy nor, usually, successful. Such conversions are, by and large, compromises, tending to sacrifice the merits and advantages of each respective medium.

The Classic Risk version of the game, with the computer risking an attack on South Africa – and losing

You can change the map display to highlight useful information – continents, as above, or different players' holdings...

Above: As well as playing with the map colours to display different data, you can opt for a rather nice antique globe

This time around, though, the Deep Red team has produced a game that should make even the most hardened critic of the first PC Risk sit up and take notice, and which should also be accessible to the Risk novice.

The biggest problem with a boardgame to PC port is that board gaming is essentially a social experience. You get to sit around face to face with your mates, immerse yourself in an alternate gaming universe, drink beer and eat pizza. Insult each other, scream, shout laugh and cry. In short it's all about, in fact it thrives on, direct human interaction.

LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE GAMER

Computer gaming, on the other hand, tends to be a solitary experience. Granted, the advent of online gaming has changed that somewhat, but unless you're lucky enough to have a LAN installed in your bedroom, it's generally going to be you, alone, sitting in a darkened room, staring feverishly at your monitor.

The fact that you're hammering Chip from Idaho into the mud really is cold comfort – you can't see him, and you have no real way of knowing just how good he is. In fact, you don't even know if he really is a he from Idaho, or a she from Isleworth.

Computer gaming, when you get right down to it, is all about providing immersive and realistic environments, complete with an acceptably strong Artificial Intelligence. Boardgames do not, as a rule, come complete with AI opponents included in the box. They are designed, from the ground up, to be played by human beings, and finding some way of replacing real people with effective AI opponents is perhaps the biggest challenge facing games developers at the moment.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of AIs on offer would barely make it past the most basic definition of protoplasmic life, never mind passing the chuffin' Turing Test.

Risk II's developers have worked hard on their AI routines, and they're pretty good, although they are prone to making some odd decisions every now and then. But the computer controlled opponents are only relevant when you're playing in single player mode, because in multiplayer mode there are no AI opponents – only human ones.

Deep Red says that its research indicated that the vast majority of people who want to play games like Risk II multiplayer didn't use AI opponents, even when they were provided, so they wanted to devote the programming effort to making the multiplay experience better. Certainly there's a lot of truth in that, but the lack of AI bot opponents in the multiplay game is probably the game's biggest weakness.

It's all very well if you can get together with three to seven people online on a regular or semi-regular basis, but it's a bit of a disappointment for those of us who may have a couple of PCs networked together at home, because it's not much of a game with just two or even three players.

A brief history of Risk

Millions of copies of Risk have been sold around the world since its US launch in 1959, making it one of the most recognisable board game brands ever – and the original computer version for the PC, launched a couple of years ago, sold more than a million units. Now Hasbro is going for a second bite at the cherry with Risk II.

The impressively long-lived game was invented more than 40 years ago by a French film director better known for his whimsical and elegiac children's film, *The Red Balloon*. Albert Lamorisse, a writer, film producer and games enthusiast in his spare time, developed his original game – then called *La Conquete du Monde* (The Conquest of the World) – in the mid 1950s, and in 1957 a certain Monsieur Boisseau took it to the giant American games company, Parker Brothers. Two years later, after much refinement by the Americans, extensive playtesting and a name change, Risk was launched to immediate success.

Its longevity stems from its fundamental simplicity, and some may feel that Hasbro risks damaging the brand name with the release of Risk II, with its addition of new territories, new rules and the 'Same Time' version.

But this view ignores the fact that, in the US alone, the rules booklet has been copyrighted anew five times since 1959, each time reflecting fundamental changes to the way the game plays. And each country seems to have its own variations, as anyone who has invited Americans to join them in a game will have discovered.

In the UK version of the rules, alternative victory conditions, in the form of secret missions, are allowed; Capital Risk (a variation included in Risk II), where the objective is to capture one or more of the opponents' nominated capitals, have also been a long-standing option; the 1980 US rules limit the number of armies per territory to 12, but compensate by allowing one dice roll per turn to become a six.

There are also subtle variations regarding who rolls first during battles (the UK has recently opted to follow the US rules and demand simultaneous rolling), the number of dice that can be rolled in defence, the value of cashed-in sets of Risk Cards, their redistribution when one player wipes out another, and the choice of either reinforcing or attacking at each turn. Arguably, it is this constant evolution which has kept the game fresh. **MS**

Above: Cards which can be traded in for extra armies still feature large in the PC version

During the reinforcement phase, the computer will highlight the territories which have received new armies

An attack on Brazil in 'Same Time' Risk: note red has a yellow die, which will have less ones and more sixes, in Peru

Damon Wilson says... 9/10

There are some games you remember from childhood as being very boring and which, as a result, you avoid ever afterwards; for me, Risk is such a game. My first memory of Risk? A big box with pictures of soldiers on it was held tantalisingly under my nose and I thought "Wow, I hope the little men shoot at each other!" I was so disappointed when it turned out to be a world map and a lot of plastic shapes that didn't even look like armies.

But the first computer version of Risk, a couple of years ago, opened my eyes to the real charm and challenge of the original game.

What I couldn't appreciate as a shallow brat was that Risk is not a battle game, but an esoteric strategy game like Backgammon or Go. The Napoleonic military background is just window dressing. Even the world map is basically unnecessary for enjoyment of the game – a board of irregularly connected coloured shapes would do as well – but pretending you're at war does add to the fun.

So Risk is an excellent multiplayer strategy game, and the Risk II developers couldn't go far wrong if they stuck to the basic formula. But they didn't: they took the (pardon the pun) risk of mucking about with the rules – and it has paid off for gamers, in cherries.

The rule changes in 'Same Time' Risk make a big difference to the way the game plays, improving them for most of us, I suspect. For those that choose to disagree, the rule and map changes can simply be toggled on and off or the 'classic' game can be played instead.

All-in-all, a winner. The AI is good enough to give a tough single-play game, the presentation is neat and attractive – and best of all, you finally get to see the little soldiers shooting at each other.

A boardgame conversion that is great fun in single as well as multiplay: a rarity

Others to watch out for

Avalon Hill's Diplomacy (Hasbro)

Perhaps the longest awaited boardgame conversion ever, the PC version of this classic game hit the shelves before Christmas. Originally launched in the late 1950s, **Diplomacy** has a cult following because it is so easy to play by mail. Set in 1900, players fight for control of the Continent. Attacks are settled not by dice but by which side fields the most powerful force. Then there is the diplomacy itself. Armies of different nations can support each other's attacks and defences, so pacts, co-operation and the inevitable betrayals are the key to the game. A much more complicated game than Risk, Diplomacy actually needs a referee to keep track of the rules in boardgame play. Of course, the computer does all that in the recent Hasbro release, but the AI of the

On the other hand, the developers have devoted a huge amount of effort to addressing the problems that usually crop up when porting a board game on to the computer, and have produced what is in effect not one but two games – Classic Risk and Same Time Risk. The former is more likely to appeal to single players, while the latter has been tweaked and streamlined so that the multiplayer experience is enormously enhanced. And that's not all, because whether you're playing Classic or Same Time, there are a number of optional rules you can add in to further change gameplay.

Below: Clearly presented menus make game and optional rule selection easy

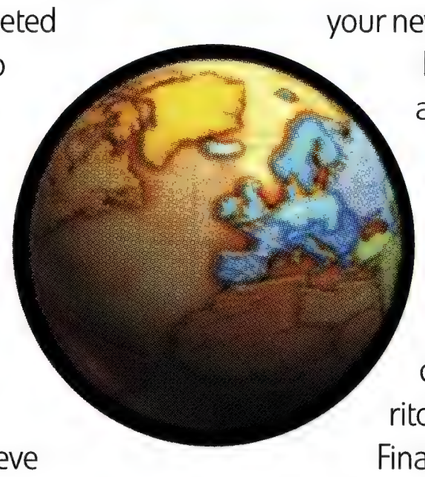
Select Game Type
RISK II
Tournament
A challenging sequence of Classic and SameTime games where you will face increasing challenges against different AI players
This is Classic Risk, identical in every respect to the original board game. Players take separate turns and can only attack one territory at a time.
SameTime brings a whole new gameplay dimension to Risk. Players can now attack on multiple fronts and all players' orders are issued simultaneously.
Classic
SameTime
Click 'Next' to continue.
Main Menu
Back
Next
Game Options and Map Setup
RISK II
Svalbard
Okiqtaluk
Game Objective:
Domination (100%)
Territory Allocation:
Random Deal
Card Trading:
Set Value
Hawaii
Philippines
Middle East Link
New Zealand
Falkland Islands
Reset to Defaults
Click within the circles to toggle the extra territories on and off.
Main Menu
Back

GAME PLAY OVERVIEW

CLASSIC RISK

Classic Risk, as it appears in Risk II, is basically derived verbatim from the original rules, and plays just like the boardgame. The map is precisely the same and if you're familiar with the original you'll find nothing here to shock or discomfort.

For those of you who've not played Risk before, a précis may be in order. Fire up a Classic game and you'll be greeted with a world map divided into various regions – Western Europe, Africa, North and South America, Asia and Australasia. These are in turn sub-divided into countries or territories – United Kingdom, Alaska, Kamchatka and so on. The object of the Classic game is usually to achieve world domination by conquering every territory on the map, although there are variable victory conditions which can be chosen before the game starts.



At the outset of a Classic game of PC Risk II, you have the allocation phase where the computer will randomly allocate territories. You'll get the Ukraine, he'll get the Congo. As each territory is allocated to a player, he or she puts a counter of the right colour on it. Once initial starting positions have been allocated, players then get to add some more units, and the game proper begins.

The game is played in turns, with each player adding reinforcements and then attacking. The number of reinforcements is determined by how many areas you control, with bonuses for controlling all of one of the six continents and for trading in sets of Risk cards. The more you can stack on territory, the less vulnerable it is to enemy attack; the more you attack with, the more likely you are to win a fight.

You can attack out of any territory where you have at least two units into an adjacent territory – and if you succeed in taking that territory, and move two or more units in, you can repeat the process by attacking from your newly-annexed land.

Players are never forced to attack, and attackers can break off whenever they wish.

After you have conducted all the attacks you want, you get one 'tactical move', which allows you to shift units from one territory to any adjacent territory you own.

Finally, before the next player gets their go, you get to draw a Risk card – if you have captured at least one territory during your combat phase. You can trade in a set of these cards for extra armies during the reinforcement phase, with a set consisting of three soldiers, three cavalrymen, three cannons or one of each. And if you actually hold the territory named on a card, you get even more bonus armies.

Politika

Diplomacy

computer opponents is a little too easy to beat. Good for online play, though.

TOM CLANCY'S POLITIKA (RED STORM/MINDSCAPE)
Politika was an interesting experiment from 1998. It is a novel, boardgame and computer game with on-line multiplay support; all were launched at the same time and set in a Tom Clancy-approved near-future after the death of President Yeltsin. You play a faction in strife-ridden Russia, competing for control of different territories. You use your agents to try to take over, say, the Volga region, buy popular support, play special cards for extra influence and then roll dice. It worked pretty well in multiplay, but wasn't much of a game for the solo player – but then it was never designed to be. Excellent support stuff for the time.

These extra units are vital – they can mean the difference between victory and defeat, and the need to get one more card to complete a set is a significant inducement for even the most timid of players to adopt an aggressive, expansionist strategy.

Combat is resolved by dice throws, and the more units you have the more dice you throw. The most dice you can have to throw is three for the attacker and two for the defender, with the defender winning ties. Beat your opponent's dice, and you'll kill one or more of his units. When there are no defending units left in a territory, the attacker wins and can then move as many surviving units in as he wants. Conversely, the attacker may call off the attack whenever he wishes.

Barry Ryan says... 8/10

Boardgames, especially those of Risk's stature, come complete with a heritage, history and gameplay system set in granite – a daunting prospect for any games developer who may be loathe to tinker with a tried and tested system. The problem is that the qualities which make for a good boardgame are often widely at variance with those needed for a successful computer game.

But Risk II works, because the developers refused to be shackled by the original game. Sure, if you want to play Classic Risk you can, but Risk II offers so much more. The innovations which the Deep Red team have incorporated into the game's mechanics are aimed at ensuring a fluency, speed and playability which make it an altogether more interesting prospect to the computer gamer.

New territories, phases of play and attacking manoeuvres all combine to provide a fast, furious and compellingly playable game. The command and control interface is intuitive and very well implemented. Amazingly, the game also looks extremely good. The 3D combat resolution screens are a nice touch, and although you'll probably tire of them and switch them off eventually (as I did), they add to the general air of quality which pervades.

Risk II is not going to set the games industry on fire, nor is it a genre buster; but it is a brilliant example of what can be achieved when a little thought and innovation is applied to a tried and tested formula. The developers never lost sight of the fact that they were not just recreating a boardgame on a PC and as a result, they have taken the best Risk had to offer and added some spice of their own.

Risk II is certainly the best PC boardgame conversion I've played, and will appeal to the family market and hardcore gamers alike.

Combat is now accompanied by a rather nice 3D animated view of early 19th century infantry, with the odd mounted officer, blazing away at each other with muskets over the borders of the disputed territories. The sight of Napoleonic era troops dukin' it out over the Falkland Islands is a little incongruous at first, but it soon ceases to matter as you scream incoherently at the screen urging your troops on to new heights of martial magnificence (otherwise known as encouraging the dice).

That, in essence, is Classic Risk. The key to success is aggressive play, and an eye for strategic positions on the map. Ownership of certain territories can substantially enhance your chances of victory, and although the game may look incredibly simple, you could easily bust a gut or short a synapse when pondering strategies and tactics for victory.

SAME TIME RISK

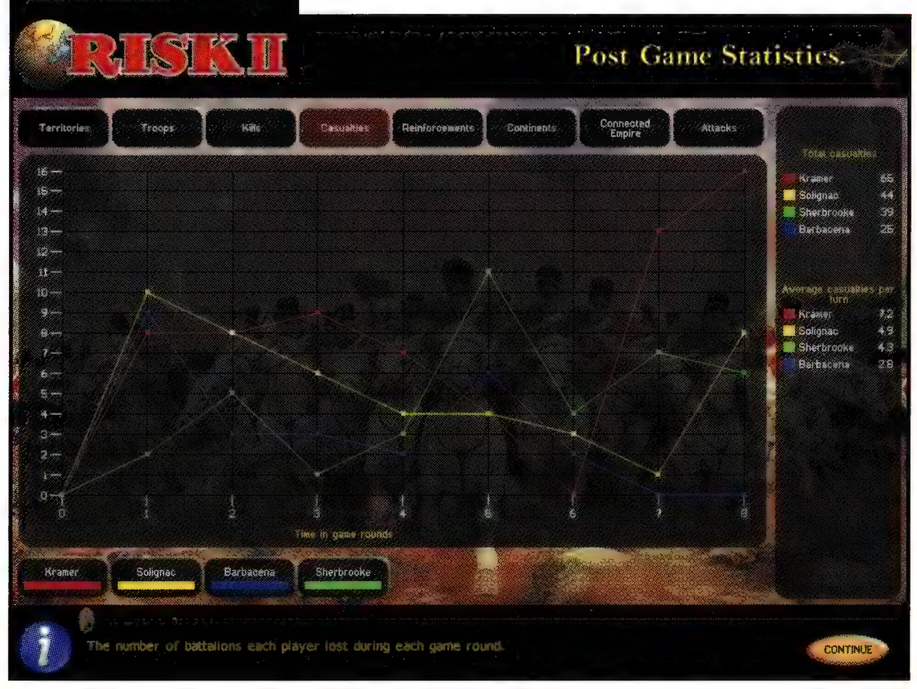
Risk II has incorporated many new elements into the gameplay system and also contains a new version of the game, intriguingly known as 'Same Time Risk'.

Same Time Risk substantially changes the Classic rules, the map and the gameplay system. The result is very, very good indeed and in effect maximises the potential which a computer-based variant of the game can provide. You see, the problem with Classic Risk is that it can take an awful long time to play a single game, and at times, it's just not very exciting.

Same Time risk can accommodate up to eight players, and all the different phases of the game (deciding where to reinforce, where to attack and tactical moves) are planned and then executed simultaneously. This adds a considerable note of urgency to the game-play and can even induce the odd adrenaline surge, because you have no idea what your opponents might be planning. This is Risk aimed squarely at the Doom generation – and it works.

In this version of the game, you lose

Below: After a game is over, you can call up a range of graphs and charts



Quote

New territories expand the arena of battle and reduce the strategic importance of certain well-known bottlenecks

Unquote

the ability to keep steam-rollering on, continually attacking out of newly won territories. To replace this, you can go on 'surge attack', which allows you to attack out of one newly won territory into an adjacent one – but you have to order a surge attack along with your other combat moves, and if you don't actually take the area you want to surge out of, then tough.

You also get the ability to attack one area from more than one adjacent territory, which can prove devastating against a tough opponent.

Deep Red has incorporated a 'connected empires' reinforcement bonus which further encourages aggressive gameplay – and helps shorten what would otherwise have been too long a game for enjoyable online play. You can now finish a Risk game in around an hour.

Below: Classic Risk – green is using the usual steamroller tactics on Egypt

Above: The victory screen – hurrah! Right: Card trading – no sets tonight, Josephine

Finally, the developers have also chosen to incorporate a nifty little change to the combat system which gives the bigger battalions the advantage they should in reality have. Instead of a six-sided die, you're rolling a 12-sided die, although it's still marked from one to six. Attack or defend with up to three armies and you'll be using a white die, with lots of low numbers on and few high ones; four to seven armies, and you get a yellow die, with fewer ones and more sixes, and so on. It is another side effect that helps to shorten the game and make it feasible for computer multiplay.

Risk II contains a host of modifications which can be included or discarded, allowing you to tailor the game to your style of play. It's now possible to choose between a number of methods of initial territory allocation. You can each choose your territories in turn, you can have a random deal or you can have an 'election' where you 'bid' for territories.

ARCTIC ROLE

Furthermore, new territories have been added to expand the arena of battle and to reduce the strategic importance of certain well-known bottlenecks – so, for example, Iceland, which used to be the only European area to border North America, has now been joined by Svalbard Island up in the Arctic Circle. Down under, New Zealand has been added, linking Australia with South America. If you don't like monkeying around with the original board, you can turn the new territories off.

You can also set different levels of victory, including 100% domination, 80%, capture enemy capitals and mission (which means you get a random mission, which could be 'destroy all black units': your enemies don't know what your mission is – and you don't know what theirs are).

There's also a diplomacy section which seems to work well and which allows you to enter into different levels of alliance with

Mark Shaw says... 9/10

I have a confession to make. Don't mock me: I'm a Risk virgin. I've never even played the original board game. I know dice, diplomacy and dirty tricks are involved, but that's all; its ancestry means nothing to me. In fact, my only real experience of board game conversions is Monopoly on the Psion – saviour of many a dull train journey – but hardly in the same league as Deep Red's impressive and exceptionally playable Risk II.

The interface is friendly, intuitive and pleasing on the eye, and armed only with basic knowledge supplied by the decent tutorial section, it's only a couple of moves before I'm successfully defending one territory while taking another in my first game.

The 'Same Time' option levels the playing field through the addition of new territories and the overhaul of the rules, forcing experienced players to update or abandon old strategies and enabling amateurs to compete.

It's somewhat surprising that the game relies on luck of the die at the combat stages, but it comes into its own at the level of adopting lines of attack at the map board and forging alliances with other players, be they human or otherwise.

As the old cliche goes, the best games take a moment to learn but a lifetime to master. Risk purists may baulk at the number and scope of the changes – surely, in fact, the reason why the game will be bought by many – but the game covers all bases in admirable style.

Although a classic Risk option is included in the package, Risk II is definitely worthy of being called a sequel as it's much more than a rehash of old ideas made pretty with a new graphical interface. The number of different options and the excellence of the multiplayer option both set it apart and will ensure its longevity.

Deep Red have done more than enough to confound the conversion critic

About the developer

Martin Croft talks to Kevin Buckner

Kevin Buckner (below, right), co-founder of games development house Deep Red, is the perfect man to head the team converting the classic boardgame Risk to the PC.

For a start, he loves board games. Indeed, until recently, he and business partner Clive Robert (below, left) played in regular games sessions with a group of mates which included Eidos executive chairman Ian Livingstone and Peter Molyneux of Lionhead Studios.

Buckner also has the advantage of having worked on the original PC version of Risk at Hasbro – and, as he himself admits, 'seeing how not to do it'.For example, the original PC Risk did away with dice in combat – but, Buckner says, "that was one of the things we did wrong. Dice are a perfect mechanism. They're quick, they're easy for people to understand, they reflect the element of fate on the battlefield. They've been used in boardgames for thousands of years, so there's got to be something right about them."

Finally, he is both a trained graphic artist and a trained computer programmer – not only can he deconstruct the look of a game interface and work out how to do it better, he also has a good idea of what can and can't be done on the PC.

Not that he claims all the credit for Risk II himself – far from it. The whole project has been very much a team effort, he stresses, with input from Clive Robert, art director Steve Beverley, creative director Jon Law and the programmers. But you can't help feeling that without Kevin at the helm, Risk II would have looked and played a lot differently.

A boardgamer 'since I was old enough to know what a boardgame was', Buckner trained as a graphic designer and 'rapidly got bored with that'. He bought himself a Commodore Pet, taught himself to program, and moved into the computer games industry. He worked for Microprose in the US and UK, then in 1993 joined Electronic Arts as a producer on titles such as Syndicate, FIFA and Theme Park. From 1995 to 1998, he was development director at Hasbro Interactive in the UK – where he met Clive Robert and also oversaw the development of the original PC Risk – but found himself 'more and more moving away from what I love doing. What I really wanted was the best of both worlds – to progress my career, but to carry on working in game development'.

In 1998, Hasbro centralised its software publishing activities in Beverley in the US and offered Buckner and Robert huge amounts of money to relocate. But Buckner says: "We had a counter-proposal for them – that we set up an independent development team in the UK." Hence the launch of Deep Red.

These days, Buckner feels, too many games are 'play once, throw away' titles, made even worse by a proliferation of game guides which tell you exactly what to do to win. "I don't understand the point of that – we've lost everything that a game was meant to be. It just becomes self-inflicted torture."

Above: Australia – with the new areas added in, it's no longer such a safe place to hide away

computer controlled players. It's fairly rudimentary but it does add another layer (however shallow) to the game.

And of course in multiplay there's a chat option which lets you insult your opponents...

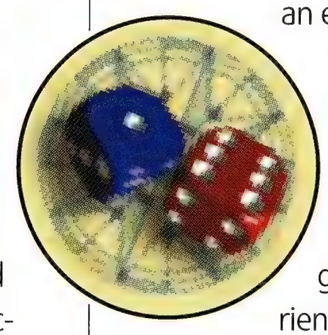
In essence, PC Risk II is an extremely polished product that will make you look at direct boardgame conversions in a new light. Deep Red has taken a tried and trusted boardgame formula and, instead of simply porting it directly onto the PC, has not been afraid to fiddle about with it quite considerably to ensure that gamers get the best from the platform.

FORCED EVOLUTION

What the people in charge of development have essentially done is go back to their first effort and embark on a ruthless programme of forced evolution which has seen Risk dragged kicking and screaming into the computer arena – successfully, this time.

Nor is Deep Red resting on its laurels. It has already developed an expansion pack for the game which would take it into whole new areas (without losing the core appeal), while it is discussing with Hasbro the possibility of adding the new territories and revised combat rules established in 'Same Time' Risk to the boardgame itself.

It may sound cheeky for someone who's latest title is a sequel to a PC version of a 40-year-old boardgame to complain of a lack of imagination – but Kevin Buckner and his team have made every effort to jazz up Risk II, with new territories, new rules, and even an entirely new game.



Indeed, Deep Red already has an expansion disk that's ready to burn, featuring naval warfare, the ability to build new links across seas, generals who can gain experience as they win battles and a complete weather system. It's just waiting for the go-ahead from Hasbro. PCSG.

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	7	COMPLEXITY	5
SOUND FX	8	INTERFACE	9
MUSIC	8	MULTIPLAY	8
CHALLENGE	5	SUPPORT	8
REALISM	4	GAMEPLAY	8

Conclusion Offers a lot more than the original, particularly in multiplayer mode, but we're still not sure it's different enough to justify waiting all of two years for it to appear.

9/10

IMPERIUM GALACTICA II: ALLIANCES
DEVELOPER: DIGITAL REALITY **PUBLISHER:** GT INTERACTIVE
SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Pentium 233 Mhz • Win 95/98 • 4xCD-ROM • 32Mb RAM
• Direct X version 7.0 • 3D Accelerator

Imperium Galactica II:

IGII stands out from the galactic crowd through stunning looks and richly layered plotlines. So, asks ***Damon Wilson,*** *does it really satisfy?*

There are various types of empire building game. Some are national or continental (like **Lords of the Realm 2** and **Imperialism**) others are planetary (Sid Meier's **Alpha Centauri** and **Outpost II**) and yet others are galactic (**Birth of the Federation** and **Master of Orion 2**).

One thing all these games tend to have in common is the option to delegate the fiddly aspects of your empire to AI control (usually described as county, city or planetary governors). **Imperium Galactica**, and now **Imperium Galactica II: Alliances**, are perhaps unique in the science fiction genre in placing the player in the position of a mere regional governor, expanding the lebensraum of a larger empire into a newly contacted galaxy.

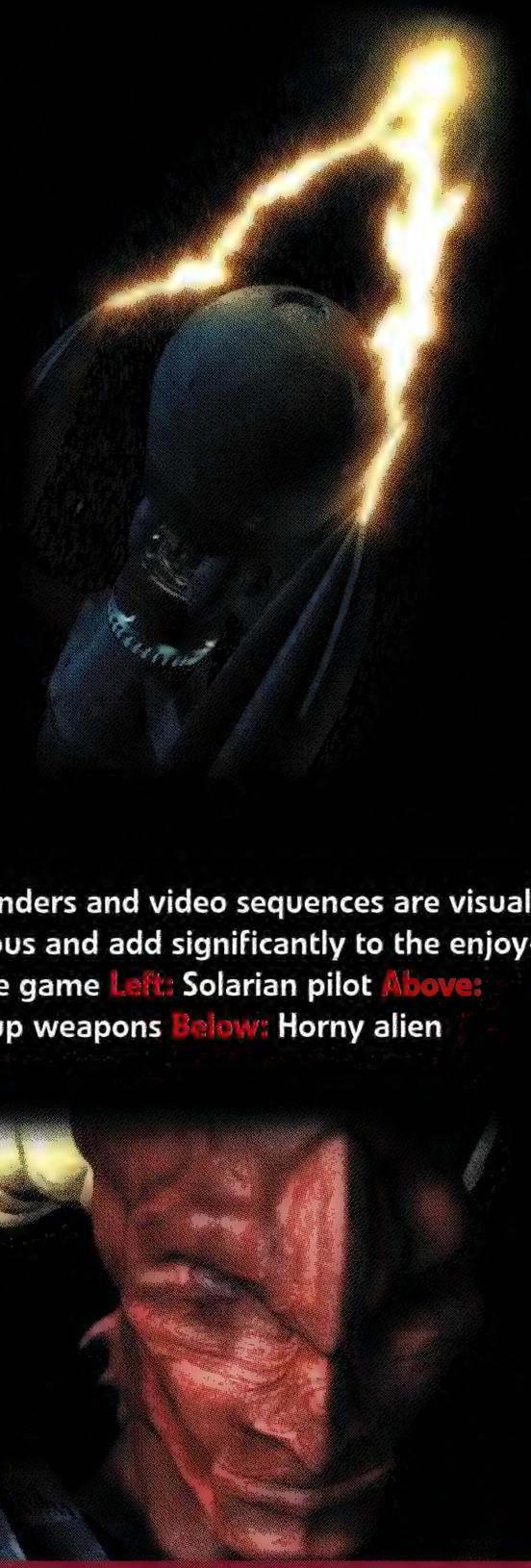
You might think this is a bit of a downer, but actually the fact you've got an irritable God-Emperor breathing down your neck – a bit like in the Caesar series – just adds another level of tension to an already tough assignment.

NEW CAMPAIGNS

The original Imperium Galactica didn't do too well in the shops, perhaps because it had no campaign mode. The player was presented with a series of real-time scenarios, each adding a new level of responsibility and consequent difficulty to their task. But there was no option to start from scratch and go on to build an empire that would make Darth Vader envious – and that is surely the entire point of this sort of game. Imperium Galactica II has fixed this problem by offering the player not only three campaign settings, but also a list of specially designed scenarios.

There are six races in the game, three of which are playable in the three campaigns. The Solarians are the humans (hairless monkeys who are good at research, but only so-so in other fields). The Shinari are goat-horned, sneaky types (good at spying and trade, but weeds in battle). Finally, the Kra'hen are the ubiquitous sci-fi race of homicidal maniacs (incapable of spying or diplomacy, but excellent at hitting people).

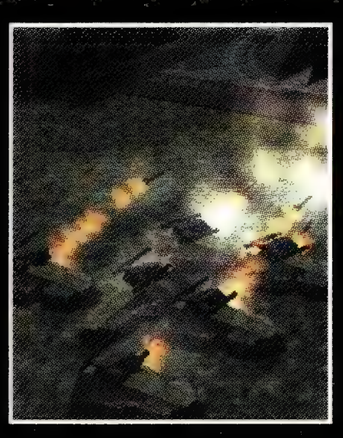
Each campaign demands different tactics, depending on the race chosen. There are also random events – pirate attacks, kidnappings, ecological disasters and so forth – and each campaign has an overall plotline or



Far left: Renders and video sequences are visually sumptuous and add significantly to the enjoyment of the game **Left:** Solarian pilot **Above:** Powering up weapons **Below:** Horny alien

Below: A cloudy day in Shinari City – just the right weather for some sneaky business

Bottom left to right: It's an explosion, OK? The warp plasma must have vented, captain. Artillery in action



Alliances

series of events to complete. The Solarians, for example, have to find the secret of eternal life. The Kra'hen, on the other hand, want to commit universal genocide.

The other three races are also playable, but only in the scenarios. These are much like the campaigns, but tend to start with more and better developed colonies, and have shorter-range goals to achieve.

In the campaign games, the player starts out with one or two colonised worlds and a small, rather primitive fleet. With these latter, they should explore outward to discover new inhabitable worlds and, eventually, bump into the other five races. At the same time, they will be improving their main base worlds, colonising new planets, boosting research, trading, spying and sending two-faced diplomatic messages. All par for the course for this sort of game, you might say, but the moment you load up IG2 you will see a massive difference to its various galactic predecessors: it is beautiful.

Quote

The fact you've got an irritable God-Emperor breathing down your neck... just adds another level of tension

Unquote

If you haven't already done so, go and take a look at the rolling demo on this month's cover disk. The in-game cut scenes are on a par with the best special effects in the coming summer's blockbusting Hollywood sci-fi spectacular (whatever that happens to be). The interface too is lovely as well as functional. The galactic level map, for example, is a swirling mass of 3D stars and interstellar gas scattered with glowing habitable worlds. The player can spin this through 360 degrees and tilt it from the perpendicular to almost edge-on – it looks good, it works well and it makes you realise just how dowdy all the galactic maps were in previous games you have encountered in the genre.

The planet surface screens are similarly easy on the eye: well designed, 3D, rotate-and-tilt scenes of deserts, grasslands, ice sheets, moonscapes, Mars-scapes and all the other planet types familiar to sci-fi fans. It's in these areas you design your planetary bases. Here again, a lot of thought has gone into making the player get into the reality of the game. Order and place one of the buildings and a lattice of scaffolding will appear on the chosen site. As game time passes this will gradually fill with the developing structure until, when the building is completed, the scaffolding collapses revealing the finished product. How nice...

The design of your colonies is a vital part of IG2. Only certain areas of land on the 3D landscape can be built upon, so you have to place buildings very carefully to avoid urban cramp later in the game. All buildings

Above left: Build up your colony in time honoured fashion – then start creating lots of big ships **Above right:** The galactic map shows you what you've explored so far. Circles are ground and ship-borne scanning ranges

need power and staff to run them. Power is easy enough – you just have to build more power stations, but staff can be difficult. All too often you will build some vital complex, only to find you haven't enough population to staff it. People are attracted to your various bases by the pleasant amenities available, but if you fill the place with parks, bars and sport stadiums you won't have enough room for those vital weapons factories. A careful balance has to be struck, familiar to anyone who has played city management games like **SimCity** or **Settlers**.

The game helpfully tells you the three main concerns of the citizens on each planet, along with the percentage of the population who are presently whining about each of them. One of the gripes is invariably the tax rate (a touch of social realism there) but others can be anything from a housing shortage to the fact that there aren't enough pubs in town. When over 30% of the population is concerned about something, you need to do something about it fast.

LEARNING TO DELEGATE

Of course, once you've got half a dozen or so planets to manage this could all become a bit much to handle, but the computer AI helpfully sub-governs things if you don't. You can even set it to develop a planet along specific lines, for example, a tank research base or a spaceship production centre. In fact, the game rather tends to run itself if you let it – rather defeating the point of playing in the first place – but you can always turn some of the planetary governors off if you find yourself kicking your heels.

Oddly enough, the method of developing better technology is also controlled on the base design level. There are three main strings to the tech tree: developments attached to ship building, tank design and structure construction. All are listed in the research screen, but can only be researched when you have enough of the appropriate research buildings. For example, simple little quad lasers only require two spaceship research bases, while great big impulse lasers demand eight. It's yet another demand on the limited building land at your disposal. Since the game refuses to allow you to build on greenbelt areas, your only choice is to discover and colonise new worlds or, better still, take them from enemy empires.

All this construction and city planning stuff is secondary to the average games player, who's main interest will be vicious space battles – and quite right too. If you've already had a swift look at the playable demo (also included on the cover disk) you may be a bit disappointed. It's all in proper 3D, but the ships are so tiny that it can look like a battle sequence from Babylon 5

Barry Ryan says... 9/10

I'll be frank. The prospect of Imperium Galactica II has had me up nights, sweating, shivering and generally gibbering like a madman. It promised to be the ultimate space empire game. Operatic in scope and depth, orchestral in its execution, a flawless symphony of all that is best in RTS. Could it possibly deliver or would I again be destined to sup from the bitter cup of despair?

Happily, IGII has fulfilled all of my impossible, unreasonable expectations – and then some. It really has got it all. Graphically it's sublime, effortlessly capturing the look and aesthetic which we all instinctively know belongs in a game of this type but which is so difficult to define, create and realise. The command and control interface is a joy to behold and use, particularly when you consider the complex and multi-faceted nature of the beast which underlies it. The game itself is rich and multi-layered, providing a diversity and variety of gameplaying styles almost unheard of. You must conceive and execute a strategic plan, which will see you achieve overall victory, while also dealing with relatively small scale tactical engagements. You must build colonies, conduct espionage, form diplomatic alliances. You must deal with innumerable crises such as rogue terrorists threatening to unleash a virus on your unsuspecting homeworld, while ensuring that your individual colonies have all the facilities and technologies they need to flourish. You'll also need to grapple with the fantastically detailed research aspect of the game, which allows you to design and create ships, weapon systems and so on.

IG II contains so much that it almost defies categorisation. Suffice it to say that it straddles some of the gaming world's most demanding and over-subscribed genres and manages to redefine the lot in one fell swoop. Stunning.

Breathtaking, awe inspiring and generally superlative. A must

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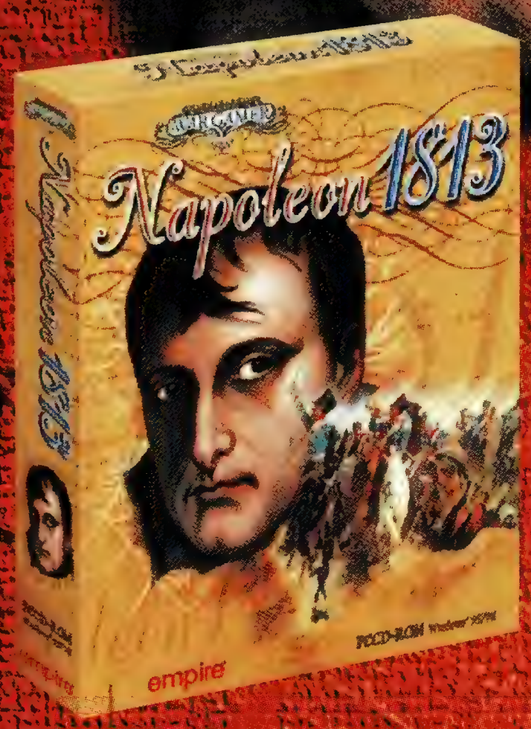

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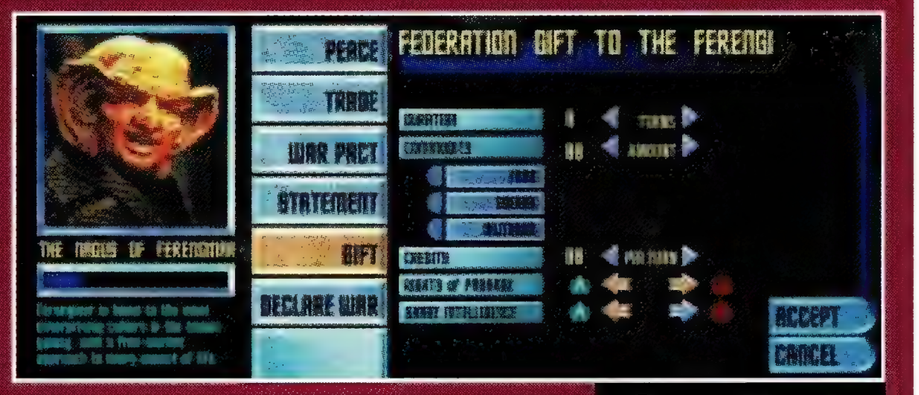
Others to watch out for

MASTER OF ORION II (ORIGINALLY MICROPROSE – BUT NOW OUT ON BUDGET ON THE CRUCIAL LABEL)
A much neglected game (that just happens to be the editor's favourite strategy game of all time). It looks rather plain by Imperium Galactica II's standards, but wins out in sheer gameplay. Take control of one of 13 races, explore, research , build fleets and fight with up to seven other empires. Some veteran players were put off buying it by the fact that Master of Orion II seems to be virtually the same code as the now ancient Master of Orion, but with nicer graphics added. Nevertheless, the actual game is near perfect if you want a solid, turn-based space empire game, so why change it?

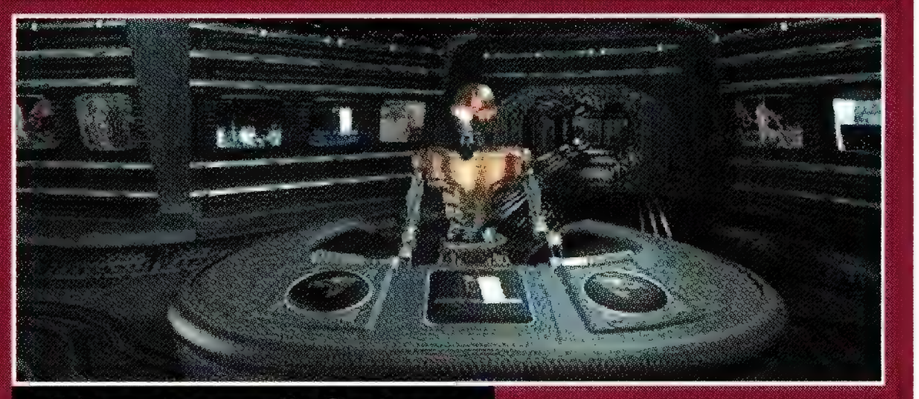
STAR TREK: BIRTH OF THE FEDERATION (MICROPROSE)
Programmed by the same team that created the Master of Orion games, this game is set in the Star Trek: The Next Generation universe and uses a lot of the same game structure as MoO2. There are, of course, various improvements added: most notably a 3D space battle section with a clever scissors-cut-paper tactical element. You can play as the Human/Federation, the Klingons, the Romulans, the Ferengi or the Cardassians, but you have to play in character (aggressive for the Klingons, sneaky for the Romulans and sick-makingly nice for the Federation) or your populations get bolshie. All things considered, a more in-depth, but less story-driven game than IG2.

STAR WARS: SUPREMACY (LUCAS ARTS)
The game that many fans of the original trilogy had been waiting decades to play; take control of either the evil Empire or the enlightened Rebels and slug it out over a galactic map. What a disappointment SW: Supremacy turned out to be... It had all the right elements (space battles, characters from the movies who can be sent on missions and later discover shocking things about their families, mincing droids and so forth), but the implementation was dull as ditchwater. Little effort was made to help the player suspend disbelief and the space battles sections look like half-finished code. It was tantamount to sacrilege...

Star Wars: Supremacy



Star Trek



Master of Orion

Damon Wilson says... 7/10

Nobody can deny that Imperium Galactica II is impressive. The cutscenes are positively jaw-dropping and the interface is attractive as well as functional. It contains everything that a good empire game should have and it adds the clever twist of having adventure game-like plots to play through. Yet it leaves me rather disappointed because some key aspects of the game haven't been properly developed.

The space battle sequences stick out most obviously. They clearly function very well, with squadrons of fighters swooping about and lumbering capital ships manoeuvring for better shots, but the game camera is, frankly, crap. It divorces the player from the action because you have to shift it yourself and it doesn't zoom in close enough. Star Trek: Birth of the Federation – IG2's main competitor – has an intelligent camera that follows the action in the 3D space battles and zooms in close to the starships. Admittedly Imperium Galactica II is real-time and BotF is turn-based, but surely the programmers, Digital Reality, could have implemented something better than they have. As it is, you feel like you've been kept in after school and have to watch your mates playing outside from an upper storey window.

The decision to make all the alien buildings and tanks look the same as yours also undermines the player's involvement in the game. Obviously, designing different 3D models for every object was prohibitive, but they could at least have made them different colours.

If you can ignore these, perhaps petty, niggles, you will undoubtedly enjoy this spectacular game. For my own part, these rather central air bubbles in the cake detracted a lot from my enjoyment of the gorgeous-looking icing.

A could-be all-time classic, flawed by some fundamental faults in implementation

Above: The research screen – depends heavily on research buildings and labs

viewed through the wrong end of a tele-scope . You can ease this by zooming the camera and spinning the battlefield about, but even the capital ships remain quite small on maximum zoom and the fighters are rarely bigger than fast moving dots. To get a proper cinematic effect it is necessary to pause every few seconds and laboriously rearrange the camera angle

On the other hand, IG2 can handle a lot of ships on screen at the same time and is clearly designed with gigantic space battles

Top: In space, no-one can hear you blow up – but everyone can see you when you start cracking up **Above:** Armour units attack a defenceless town

Martin Croft says... 7/10

Imperium Galactica II: Alliances is stunningly beautiful, but also pretty annoying in some ways. Design is all very well in computer games, but I'd appreciate a little less time being spent on the aesthetics and a bit more on the mechanics of gameplay. I found that some of the pretty chrome really got in the way; the menus have this annoying habit of circling around the screen in a rosette pattern, and with my original mouse settings it was incredibly difficult to select any of the options available.

But once you have managed to overcome any problems with the interface, what you're presented with is a most excellent space empire game. Granted, there's nothing hugely original here – we've all seen the explore, exploit, build, research, fight sequence a hundred times by now – and I wouldn't have minded a few more alien races to play around with: but what you get is extremely competent and in the main works well. It's certainly a very good entrant to the increasingly crowded space empire management sub-genre: but it's not going to seduce me away from my favourite game of all time (well, equal with Civ 2) – Master of Orion 2: Battle at Antares. How can you compare it with such a crude 3D-less game, I hear you cry? Well, when you don't have technology like 3D to dazzle people with, you have to work harder on other areas – in particular, the underlying gameplay – to make up for it. Don't get me wrong: I enjoyed playing IGII, and I think it's a very good game indeed; it's just not really my cup of tea. I recognise that a huge amount of work has gone into it, but then a lot of work went into the Millennium Dome – and I wouldn't want to go there more than once. Or even once. I do know, though, that there are people – those who enjoyed Homeworld, for example – who will find this one right up their star sector.

Too much style, not enough substance - but a competent game nonetheless

in mind. If only three or four ships are duking it out – the most common type of battle at the start of the game – it does look unimpressive. But, later in the game when two huge fleets slam into each other, the screen is filled with explosions, swarming squadrons of fighters and ponderously manoeuvring battleships. The player can give orders in pause and has a number of set battle formation buttons to toy with; so combats can become very involved but, again, only when you've got enough ships to order about.

COME, FRIENDLY BOMBS...

Once you've hammered your way through the enemy's fleet, your tank force can hit the alien colony base. Rather disappointingly, considering the amount of work put into the visual side of the game, alien cultures do not have alien looking buildings; they all look and function just like yours. The same is true of their tanks. The game designers went to the trouble of creating different star ships for the different cultures, so why stop there? Unfortunately the land battles also suffer from wrong-end-of-the-telescope syndrome, especially when there are only a few tanks on each side. Still, throw a couple of dozen into battle and you'll enjoy a lovely, violent light show.

Of course, war is the very last recourse for a responsible leader (or so I'm told). You can also annoy your galactic neighbours with diplomatic shenanigans and spying scams. For the latter you will need to build a spy base for each agent you wish to support. These can then be trained to heighten their skills, sent out to gather information, set to sabotage enemy bases and fleets, or be told to hunt down alien spies in your own territory. Diplomacy is simply a matter of contacting an alien empire, then negotiating treaties, offering to exchange tech, issuing demands or simply chatting in the hopes of improving relations with them.

Trade is similarly straightforward, but has nothing to do with commodities. These are limited in IG2 to people and electricity, and these can be rather difficult to package. Instead, once you have build a trade port, you can buy capital ships, fighters and tanks – which can be useful if you're in too much of hurry to build them yourself.

Where Imperium Galactica II is most notably different from its immediate competitors in the galactic empire stakes (most notably **Star Trek: Birth of the Federation**) is in its various plots. In other games you have to vary your style of play, depending on your race of choice, but all you actually have to do in the end is conquer everyone in sight. IG2 not only breaks with this tradition by combining real-time space strategy with adventure game style quests, but it also gives the player three major storylines and ten minor ones. It could take months to make your way through them all, which is great value in anyone's book. PCSG

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	9	COMPLEXITY	5
SOUND FX	8	INTERFACE	9
MUSIC	7	MULTIPLAY	7
CHALLENGE	6	GAMEPLAY	7
REALISM	6	AI	7

Conclusion Superb to look at, except in the battle sequences; multiple plots to explore; above-average space empire game let down by shallow management system

8/10

Close Combat IV –

The latest game in Atomic's popular series is set in the bleak midwinter. ***Barry Ryan*** *provides a strategic overview...*

DEVELOPER: ATOMIC **PUBLISHER:** SSI
SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Pentium 200 Mhz • Win 95/98 • 4xCD-ROM • 32Mb RAM • 60Mb Hard Drive • 4Mb Video card • Supports keyboards and mouse • 28.8 modem for head-to-head play (multiplayer support via Mplayer, TCP/IP and IPX)

CLOSE COMBAT
MARGRET
DEBRIEF
BATTLE DEBRIEF
TOTAL AMERICAN VICTORY
The battle ended because all the German forces were destroyed or routed.
The Americans gained control of the map and the German battle group was forced to disband.
The Americans won the battle because they control a greater number of crucial victory locations than the Germans.
DETAILS
SOLDIER
COMMAND NEXT
Right-click on screen element to display more detailed help

Close Combat IV: Battle of the Bulge is the latest instalment in Atomic's excellent Close Combat series of small unit tactical games.

Close Combat III: The Russian Front was undoubtedly one of the best games of 1999, combining thought-provoking strategic and tactical level play with visceral thrills and spills more usually associated with the likes of **Tiberian Sun** or **Total Annihilation**. This sort of cross-genre hybridisation is difficult to achieve at the best of times, but when you're dealing with two of the gaming industry's sacred cows it becomes all the more improbable. Yet the Close Combat series manages to appeal to dyed-in-the-wool strategy gamers and lure in those who would normally be put off by what is quite a hardcore strategy gaming experience.

CCIV attempts to take the series to the next evolutionary level by providing control over strategic level battlegroups. Unlike in previous games, where you fought through a predetermined series of battles, in CCIV you (and your opponent) determine where combat will happen – so sometimes you'll find yourself fighting over the same map a dozen times in a campaign game.

Close Combat IV, like its predecessors, is a top-down RTS, which means that you look down on a map depicting a part of the area the battle raged over. On it are buildings, forests, rivers and a wide range of other terrain features (graveyards included). Units appear as groups of men (if infantry),or single guns, tanks, armoured cars, trucks and half-tracks, all seen from above.

The Ardennes in December 1944 was the theatre for Hitler's 'Wacht am Rhein' offensive, his last desperate gamble in the West. The game covers a period of 15 days, with two strategic turns each day, and the player can control the Germans or the Americans. All the historical units are present, from the humble American GI to the awesome German King Tiger.

Above: The strategic map, where you plan battlegroup movement and allocate air and artillery support

COMMAND AND CONTROL

One of the outstanding aspects of the Close Combat series is the excellent command and control system. It's a masterpiece of simplicity and functional excellence. Thankfully it remains practically unaltered in CCIV. If you right click on a unit, up pops its orders menu. Click on move, click the destination and they'll toddle off quite happily, assuming their morale hasn't cracked and they aren't under fire. You can also opt to have them move fast – when they're more vulnerable to enemy fire – or sneak, which means they get to their destination much slower, but are more likely to spot hidden enemy units and evade attack.

Once you've got them where you want them, a defensive posture will ensure they attack any enemy coming into view, otherwise you can select ambush, which means they'll attempt to remain hidden until an

Left top: You won't often see a total American victory in the early campaign game Middle: US forces await the German onslaught Bottom: Authentic film clips are used as intros

Battle of the Bulge

enemy reaches a certain distance. They will then launch a (hopefully devastating) surprise attack. If you've spotted someone you want them to have a crack at, select fire, hold down the left mouse button, drag to the target and drop, and the unit will open up. It's as simple as that.

You're also going to have to master the art of close combat infantry tactics in order to prosper. Let's assume you need to take a house held by the enemy. You pepper it with mortar fire to soften up the defending units, lob in some smoke and lay down some covering fire. Grit your teeth, and send your lads in. Hopefully, they'll be able to polish off the battered defenders.

Be careful, though. CCIV is extremely intolerant of cowboy, gung ho tactics, and ill conceived, off the cuff assaults will usually have only one outcome – a bloody nose for you.

The effective use of armour is also important in CCIV. Its predecessor CCIII was criticised for its use of armour, with tanks and armoured vehicles engaging in combat over improbably short distances on the open steppes of Russia. In reality, most armour engagements would have been resolved long before tanks reached that type of proximity – the range of the dreaded German 88mm gun was nearly a mile.

CCIV, however, avoids this problem due to the nature of the Ardennes terrain. The densely forested, hilly landscape ensured that tanks did meet at close quarters.

The Atomic team have nicely factored this into the game. As an object lesson in how not to use armour, try sending tanks into urban or heavily forested areas without supporting infantry. Many a Jagdpanther has fallen to my lowly US Bazooka squads for this very reason, and, if positioned and utilised correctly, anti-tank guns and bazooka squads can become your most effective weapons. In fact, they're the only US units that's have any real chance against German tanks — American armour is, not to put to fine a point on it, absolute pants.

The genesis of the Close Combat series

The Close Combat series has a complicated history: in the dim and distant past, developer Atomic was working closely with US board wargames company Avalon Hill on the computerisation of a number of their titles, including AH's extremely popular game of squad-level combat in World War II, Squad Leader.

Atomic and Avalon Hill eventually fell out, and went their separate ways. Atomic eventually released the original **Close Combat** under the Microsoft label, and followed it up with **Close Combat II: A Bridge Too Far** and Close Combat III: The Russian Front. However, last year, Atomic parted company with Microsoft, and the latest game in the series, Close Combat IV: Battle of the Bulge, has been published by SSI, well-known for its Panzer General and Steel Panthers series.

Ironically, SSI is owned by Mattel, the world's biggest toy and game company, while Avalon Hill has now been bought by Hasbro, Mattel's arch rival, and is scheduled to launch the computer version of **Advanced Squad Leader**, its follow-up to Squad Leader, in the third quarter this year.

At the end of last year, as SSI was launching CCIV, Microsoft released a compendium set of the first three games in the series, which means that gamers interested in the period or in squad-based real time games can now compare all four games with relative ease.

CLOSE COMBAT

This is the grand-daddy of the series, the one that got the ball rolling way back in the halcyon days of 1996. The theatre of operations is Normandy, 1944. The Allies have just landed on the beaches and you take command of the American forces attempting to break out of the beachhead, or the Germans and attempt to fling them back into the sea.

Graphically, it all looks incredibly primitive today — but once you can overcome the visual short-comings, all the factors which combine to make the series a success are here for all to see. Granted, the command and control interface is slightly different, involving multiple left clicking to access the command menu and issue orders, which is rather more cumbersome than the right click evolution of the system which makes its debut in CCII. But once you re-calibrate your brain, it soon becomes second nature.

The original Close Combat also comes complete with an excellent on-line glossary of weaponry and historical information. This was incorporated into the second game in the series (see below), diluted in the third and finally, inexplicably and unforgivably, done away with altogether in the fourth.

In terms of gameplay CCI provides a stiff and unforgiving challenge, especially if you come to it from Close Combat III as I did. This is top class stuff, though, and once you overcome the initially primitive impression created by its dated graphics it will provide you with hours of stimulating play.

CLOSE COMBAT II – A BRIDGE TOO FAR

By far the most cosmopolitan offering in the Close Combat series CCII is based on Operation Market Garden, the Allies' ill-conceived attempt to shorten the war by capturing vital bridgeheads over the Rhine. On the Allied side you command American, British and Polish troops or, as usual, you can switch allegiance to take control of the German forces.

In terms of gameplay and overall feel, this is the game closest to CCIV. The action centres around such well known and bloody hot-spots as Arnhem, Nijmegen, and Eindhoven, and the emphasis is has been placed very firmly on historical accuracy and faithful re-creation.

If you've always fancied yourself as a bit of a stiff-upper-lipped British

continued on page 54. . .

series overview (cont'd)

continued from page 53. . .

officer, stalking up the bridge with nothing but a brolley between you and the SS, this is the game for you. The control system is identical to that found in CCIII and IV, and it'll be immediately accessible to anyone familiar with these games. But the best thing about CCII is that it manages to utilise a points requisition system which allows you to have some input into the make-up of your fighting force, without compromising the sense of realism and accuracy which the game works so hard to achieve.

As with Close Combat I, it comes complete with an excellent on-line encyclopaedia detailing and picturing all the weaponry encountered in the game – which gives us anoraks something to chew over as we plan our next assault.

CLOSE COMBAT III - THE RUSSIAN FRONT

For many, this represents the finest the Close Combat series has to offer - so far, at least. Rather than present a series of scenarios depicting a relatively short-lived single operation, CCIII attempts to present the whole of the War in the East, from the opening

shots of Barbarossa to the final doomed defence of the Reichstag in Berlin (or the Kremlin, if the Germans do particularly well).

Obviously, by adopting such a broad sweep, questions of historical accuracy went very quickly by the board. Instead, Atomic concentrated on creating a devastatingly playable, compulsive wargame loosely based around some of the most famous encounters of that campaign.

You take command of the German or Russian forces and as you progress through the ranks, you'll be entrusted with more units and greater responsibility. But the outstanding feature of CCIII is the excellent points requisition system, which allows players to customise their forces from the outset.

Being a devious, underhand type I prefer lots of artillery which I can conceal in burnt-out ruins and rubble. I like to set them on ambush and wait for my unsuspecting enemies to get within about 10 feet, and blow them to smithereens. If you'd prefer to construct an armoured spearhead and bludgeon your enemy into submission, given a little careful unit husbandry, you can.

The real point about this system was that it encouraged you to identify with your units in a most unhealthy manner. You'll find yourself renaming them, cosseting them and weeping floods of tears when they get mauled. CCIII may not be the most demanding or historically accurate game of the series, but for straight-down-the-line playability, it's undoubtedly the best. **BR**

LAMBS TO THE SLAUGHTER

Historically, of course, this is exactly how it was. To win as the Americans, cunning and subterfuge are the order of the day, and you'll find that it's the little victories that count. Patiently manoeuvring units, selecting the correct positions, waiting for the right moment to strike, that's what CCIV is about.

The tension which CCIV engenders is unmatched by any other RTS. There are times when a lull in fighting on the screen, which allows your fevered brain some respite, will be welcomed with open arms.

Above: Before deciding on where to move, you can have a close look at each of the maps battles are fought on

All this, however, will be familiar to old Close Combat hands. But what those of you who are more familiar with the series will perhaps be surprised to hear is that CCIV actually eschews many of the developments made in CCIII. The game is in fact closer in feel to the first two games in the series (see sidebar). The points requisition system which allowed you to buy units in CCIII

Barry Ryan says... 7/10

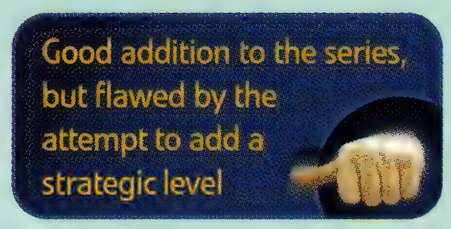
In many ways the CC series is a unique gaming experience, marrying the historical accuracy and exacting gameplay required of a traditional wargame with the adrenaline rush of RTS games like Command and Conquer or Total Annihilation.

Ever since I managed to beat the ravening hordes of the Red Army back from the gates of the Reichstag with my motley crew of old men, ladies of ill repute and the inmates of the local mental asylum in the grand finale of CCIII, I've been salivating at the prospect of CCIV. Unfortunately, it's more wargames limbo than wargames heaven. In previous CC games, it's been hedgerows, houses and alleyways you're fighting over in grim, hard-fought encounters around a crossroads or strategic building. You're unconcerned about the larger strategic picture — you've got to take that hill/ford/garden shed and that's all that matters.

The addition of strategic level gameplay merely serves to muddy the waters. Each level finds you in command of a different outfit and pretty soon you cease to identify with your individual units, as would have been the case in CCIII: a medium machine-gun crew in one sector of the Bulge is pretty much the same as the one in the last, and who cares if they live or die?.

My advice to the crew at Atomic is to leave grand strategic games to the likes of Talonsoft and concentrate on small scale encounters and campaigns. This is, after all, where the Close Combat system excels.

In the final analysis CCIV falls between the proverbial rock and a hard place. It's still an enjoyable game and definitely a worthwhile purchase, particularly if you're a fan. Ultimately though, it fails to deliver on the initial promise.



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Others to watch out for

If Second World War small units tactics are your particular field of interest, then there are a number of games which might appeal to you when you've had enough of the thrill of real time, top down fighting.

Talonsoft has produced a series of games based on its East Front engine, including **East Front II** (avoid the original **East Front** if it turns up in a boot sale), **West Front** and the about-to-be-released **Rising Sun**. All are turn-based and use hexagonally-gridded maps, and the smallest infantry unit is the platoon rather than the squad.

Avalon Hill's PC version of its **Advanced Squad Leader** due out in the autumn, while SSI plans to release **Steel Panthers 4** imminently.The Steel Panthers series is regarded by many wargamers as the ultimate simulation of combined arms in

Commandos

the 20th century, and in some ways is far more realistic than Close Combat.

Two games with very similar themes are Commandos from Eidos and Hidden & Dangerous from Take 2. In both, you control a crack team of Allied commandos in World War II; but in Commandos, the action is all seen from above, as you move your little men about an isometric map,

Hidden & Dangerous

while in Hidden & Dangerous, you're right in there yourself in nerve-wracking 3D.

This is not to say that the one game is necessarily better than the other – both have their strengths and weaknesses. Try **Commandos** if you want a good hard think and **Hidden & Dangerous** if you need a good sweat – but in either case give yourself plenty of time. **DW**

(and, to a more limited extent, in CCII: A Bridge Too Far) has been axed. You get your units at the start of each battle, and if you don't like the look of 'em, well, tough.

This, of course removes one of the major plus points of CCIII, the ability to create, over time, a fighting force of your own design and, consequently, one with which you can identify. But then, CCIII also pushed require-

Quote

...manouevring units, selecting the correct positions, waiting for the right moment to strike, is what CCIV's about

Unquote

ments of historical accuracy ever so slightly to one side, in order to please the Gods of playability — and the sacrifice was well rewarded. CCIV returns to out-and-out historical accuracy, and there's nothing wrong with this. However, the problem is that the Ardennes offensive was in many respects the ultimate example of the proverbial "game of two halves".

Initial German surprise was total and they enjoyed overwhelming superiority in armour and men. This means that if you opt to play the Americans, in the early stages of the campaign you'll often find yourself trying to hold off an entire Kampfgruppe – perhaps five panthers, a Mark IV, associated infantry and half-tracks (including the fearsome rocket half-track) – with an anti-tank gun and a bazooka team. Sure, you'll have infantry, but frankly they're not worth a damn against concentrated armoured units. Once your bazooka team and AT gun are wiped out (and they will be, rather quickly too), the game's up.

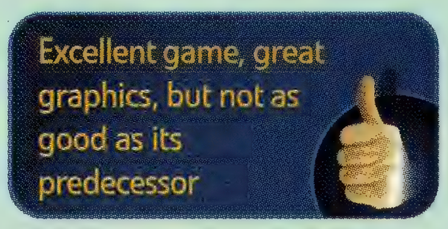
Unfortunately, unlike CCIII, you can't save your units by running off the field, to hold them over for another day. You have to sit like a large overdressed lemon and preside over the inevitable slaughter of your forces, which is annoying and frustrating in the extreme and will only end when your force morale gets too low. Incidentally, the morale aspect of CCIV is actually something I quite like. Both forces have a morale bar and, as the battle progresses and casualties are taken, morale will fall. Take out a Kommand Panzer, and German morale will dip noticeably. Allow yours to fall below a certain point and the battle will end.

Martin Croft says... 8/10

For me, Close Combat III: The Russian Front was awesome – beautiful graphics, a huge historic sweep and an element of role-playing. Granted, it had problems – armour fighting at ridiculously short ranges on the open steppes, for example, and the silly idea of refighting the War in the East on a squad level.

Close Combat IV: Battle of the Bulge addresses the second issue by introducing a strategic map, allowing you to shift battle groups and giving you some control over where fights occur and who is involved. And because of the close nature of the terrain in the Ardennes, short range tank clashes make more sense. But it has lost CCIII's between-scenario point buying system, while the strategic map doesn't give you enough real control to make up for the resulting loss of personal identification with your units. My biggest complaint, though, is that Atomic hasn't fully thought through the implications of a campaign game where you could easily fight 30 battles on the same map. It's great that damage caused in previous engagements is still there when you start another battle on the same map: but there needs to be a way to get rid of wrecked tanks from previous encounters. I've got a campaign running where the German set up area on one map (I'm the Yanks) has become so littered with wrecked AFVs that it's now impossible for them to move their tanks out of it. But I can't beat them, because my anti-tank weapons are static – so every game on that map is basically a waste of time.

Single scenarios or multiplayer games are just as good as they were in CCIII: but the strategic campaign game is disappointing. Overall, though, CCIV is a worthy addition to the series. But please, Atomic, bring back the points buying system...

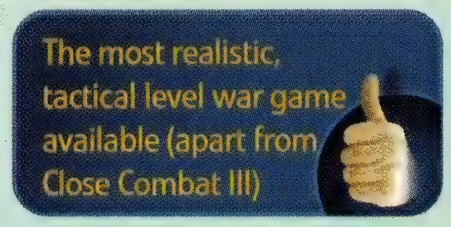


Damon Wilson says... 8/10

Just to put the cart before the donkey, I'll just start off by giving my final summing-up of the game: if you've not played any of the previous Close Combat games, you're in for a treat. If, on the other hand you've played and enjoyed Close Combat III – The Russian Front, you may be rather disappointed with the new incarnation.

A Close Combat novice will revel in the simple but flexible interface, the realistic sound effects, the satisfying explosions, the true-to-life units and, above all, the gritty realism of the squad level battles. Every single soldier counts and the loss of a squad demands a drastic rearrangement of strategies. No other WWII game series give this kind of depth or the same feeling of personal involvement; you'll feel genuine despair when your only anti-tank gun gets mortared to bits. On the other hand, those of you who've been here before (especially CCIII) will probably find a few gripes. Aside from slightly improved graphics, the gameplay has not been changed – but with such a good system, that's fair enough.

The game is too easy if you play the Germans and too hard if you're the Americans, while the added strategic movement level is too simplistic to be very rewarding. The in-game description of the strengths and weaknesses of the various units from previous CC games has inexplicably been dropped and, most telling of all, so has the between-battle points system that allowed you to 'buy' and update units. It may seem a little thing, but this aspect of the previous game got the player really involved with the individual troops, noting their achievements and feeling sorry when they died. In Close Combat IV, you soon become just another throw-'em-at-the-cannons commander... much like the real ones at the Battle of the Bulge.



If you opt to play the Germans, on the other hand, the first few levels are laughably easy, and provide very little challenge. So it's too easy if you're the Nazis, and too difficult if you're the Yanks.

The most anticipated aspect of CCIV, though, was the inclusion of strategic level play. But in actual game-play terms, the strategic level in CCIV proves to be rudimentary and unsophisticated to say the least.

The other great innovation promised by CCIV was the addition of off-screen artillery barrages and airstrikes. Again, in gameplay terms they're almost always insignificant and frequently completely ineffective. When you consider that air-power and its use was the single most decisive factor in the resolution of the battle, it's inexplicable.

The overwhelming feeling in the PCSG office concerning CCIV was "one step forward, two steps back". Far from adding to game-play, the strategic level seems to have detracted from playability and confused issues.

The points requisition system in CCIII was far superior in all respects. It made the game accessible and immediately understandable while also managing to maintain just enough authenticity to ensure that the whole affair still felt like a "real" wargame. Atomic were on the right track with CCIII, but they've gone slightly astray with this. While not quite a retrograde step, it feels rather like an evolutionary dead end.

Having said that, Close Combat IV: Battle of the game is still a good game, and one which is well worth adding to the dedicated strategy gamer's collection. PCSG.

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	8	COMPLEXITY	8
SOUND FX	9	INTERFACE	8
MUSIC	6	MULTIPLAY	6
CHALLENGE	7	GAMEPLAY	9
REALISM	9	AI	6

Conclusion An extremely good and historically accurate tactical level RTS wargame, but if you've played its predecessor in the series, you might be disappointed

8/10

History of the Bulge

December 1944: following the success of the D-Day landings and the collapse of the German forces in France, Allied commanders have their eyes set on the drive across the Rhine and into the industrial heartland of the Ruhr.

Now, though, winter grips the landscape, and American and British forces are resting and resupplying before the New Year thrust into Germany.

Allied commanders believe the German war machine no longer poses any serious offensive threat. Meanwhile, the Russians are grinding their way inexorably towards Berlin. The Allies expect the war to end by early spring.

But Hitler has other plans. He is convinced that if he can take a heavy enough toll of Western Allied troops, he can force a peace in the West and then turn on the Russian hordes.

So he resolves to take perhaps the greatest military gamble of his career, an attack through the Ardennes aimed at the Belgian port of Antwerp, cutting off vast numbers of Allied troops from their supply routes. In essence, a repetition of the attack which led to the Fall of France in 1940.

Codenamed Watch on the Rhein to make it sound purely defensive, the operation saw the creation of an army of 250,000 men supported by nearly 1,500 tanks and assault guns, plus armoured cars, half-tracks, 1,900 pieces of heavy artillery and the revolutionary new Me262 jets – and all in complete secrecy.

Hitler's gamble – that bad weather would keep the vastly superior Allied air force off his back – initially paid off. At 5am on December 16 1944, the Germans smashed into the American lines. Surprise was total: 25 German divisions hit four and a half American divisions. In some sectors, the Americans were outnumbered by ten to one.

American commanders initially completely failed to grasp the gravity of the situation, and many units were cut off and, after using up their limited ammunition, forced to surrender. Yet as these men marched off into captivity, all over the Ardennes cooks, bandsmen, clerks and typists were being issued with weapons and thrown into the line where many of them performed heroically.

American resistance stiffened, and the Germans were stopped at the vital road junctions at Bastogne and St Vith. Then, on December 23, the weather cleared and finally the Allies could bring their overwhelming air superiority to bear. BR

DEVELOPER: FIRAXIS **PUBLISHER:** EA
SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
Pentium 133 MHz • Win 95/98 • 4x CD-ROM • 16 Mb RAM • 60 Mb hard drive • 2Mb SVGA video card • DirectX 6.0 • Supports keyboard and mouse • Also requires Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri

Alpha Centauri was seen by many as Civ 3: but Alien Crossfire proves that Firaxis' game is much more than a sequel. ***Damon Wilson*** *provides an overview*

Alien Crossfire

Some games have too much damned history. Alien Crossfire is just an add-on pack, but to give the less clued-up reader an idea of what it's about, I'm going to have to go all the way back through games history to 1991.

At the turn of the 1980's, computer games were about as ambitious with their subject material as Saturday morning cartoons; they used lots of B-movie sci-fi and fantasy, but nothing much set in the real world, and anything even vaguely educational was right out. Then, in 1991, a programmer called Sid Meier proved that history lessons can be fun with a game called Civilisation. It was the first world-wide best-selling computer game; in fact, the odds are that you have already played it at least once. So, the handful of you who spent the Nineties hiding in a cave, as indeed I sometimes wish I had, take a peek at the attached box for a run-down on what many people hold to be the game of the decade.

Right, now we've got rid of that strange lot, the rest of us can move on...

Alpha Centauri was one of the most anticipated games in the run-up to Christmas 1998 - at least, that's what games-media bods like myself believed. In fact when it was released it surprised enthusiastic reviewers by not doing very well with the public. Nobody was quite sure why, but the fact that two very similar games were released by Microprose (Civilisation II: Test of Time and Civilisation: Call to Power) at the same time must have stretched the Civ-fan market beyond capacity. Almost nobody buys the same sort of game twice in the same month, and poor old Alpha Centauri didn't have Civilisation III written on it in big letters to guide punters to the best of the three available. All in all, it was a marketing blunder fit to stand alongside the New Coke fiasco.

So, what did you all miss? In Alpha Centauri, as you are told in the introduction, a United Nations expedition to the eponymous star has run into trouble. Their ship, the Unity, starts to fall apart and the few thousand occupants deal with the problem by dividing into seven ideologically warring factions (green, militarist, religious, humanitarian, capitalist, totalitarian and scientific). Each group takes an escape pod and heads for a nearby planet just before the spaceship goes boom.

Below: Greenhouses – important for growing food, and also for relaxing in

Above: Planet may seem harsh for settlers from Earth – but things change

Above: At the start of the game, explore as much of Planet as you can. Rovers are useful for this purpose...

The player takes control of whichever faction takes their fancy and, as with Civilisation, helps them build towns, explore the 2D map and interact with the other six factions. The basic gameplay is much the same as in Civilisation, the main aim being to develop new technologies from a set tech-tree. These increase your survival chances, allow you to build secret projects (one-off discoveries, like an Empaths' Guild, that can give you an edge on the other factions) and eventually give you the weapons to conquer your fellow shipwreck survivors.

This may all sound like run-of-the-mill sci-fi, but don't be deceived; Alpha Centauri has one of the most complex and well-worked backgrounds of any PC game. For example, the major problem your faction will face is not, in the long run, their fellow humans, but the planet itself. At first it simply seems inhospitable, but as the game progresses you will find increasing evidence that the whole place is a giant, living organism; from here the plot gets somewhat weird. Firaxis even commissioned a novella (by Steven Mitchell) to flesh out the game's intro. This was published on the alphacentauri.com site and, being very well written, really added lustre to the

Martin Croft says... 8/10

When Sid Meier first showed me Alpha Centauri, I wasn't that impressed. I suspect I shared most Civ players' initial reaction – "it's just Civ 2 with bad graphics". So while I played it for a while, I soon gave up. Recently, I had to get up to speed with it again, so I could do this review – and I found that I'd been completely unfair on it (probably because I was originally playing it on a machine with bad sound – and the f/x noises are part of the joy of the game). And now that Firaxis has expanded on the original with Alien Crossfire, it's 10 times better.

They've added a host of new fungal lifeforms which you will have to contend with as you explore Planet, plus, of course, they've added seven completely new factions, two of which are Alien beasties. The whole things really hangs together well, providing a coherent narrative which brings Planet to life much more than in the original. The whole thing makes much more sense now, and Planet becomes a real world rather than a series of squares to be explored and exploited.

The aliens, too, are well-handled, and I like the way their alien-ness is communicated in a relatively clean way through the text interface. It's a shame, though, that someone didn't do a better job of continuity control – it's a bit odd to have a lobster-faced alien refer to Brother Lal of the Peacekeepers as 'our former colleague', as if they'd arrived on Planet with the ill-fated UN mission.

I'm not too convinced about the new Secret Projects – but then, I never bothered with half of the originals, or indeed many of the Wonders of the World in Civ 2 (for me, the wonder was why anyone built them). Some of the new technologies which you can research are good, though, and the alien factions' ability to target particular areas for research (one of their big advantages over the human groups) is a welcome addition.

Far more than just an add-on, this brings a whole new dimension to a sadly under-rated game

Know your civilisation

In the original Civilisation, the player was given a 2D map of a whole (randomly generated) planet – a small area of which was occupied by a Stone Age tribe. Your tribesmen built villages, explored and expanded their turf. At the same time your 'wise men' worked on advancing your civilisation. Turn-by-turn your people built-up 'knowledge points' and these eventually let you 'discover' a new technology - anything from pottery to nuclear fusion, depending on how far you had made it up the tech-tree. These usually had some direct, true-to-life effect on play; pottery allows food surpluses to be stored to avoid famine, and fusion lets you build safe nuclear power plants. There were also up to seven computer-controlled civilisations going through the same process and interacting with yours (i.e. trade, diplomacy, intellectual exchange and, more often than not, war). The winner was the first people to make it to a space-age level of technology, and then managed to launch an interstellar exploration mission.

The graphics were plain, but functional. The sound was minimal. The combat was very simple: move your unit at an enemy unit and the computer judges which was destroyed. The gameplay, though - that was epic and addictive.

The game's success with the public can be judged by the fact that it is still on sale in most big retailers nearly ten years later. Naturally, there was a sequel – Civilisation II (the same game, but with prettier graphics). And in a parallel offering, Sid Meier's Colonisation, you took control of the first settlers to land in the New World, competed with other colonising Europeans and aimed to achieve national independence before the game turn equating to 1776. All well and good... but what a lot of people really wanted to do was to continue where the original Civilisation left off, with the human race on the verge of colonising a nearby star system. In early 1999, that's exactly what they got – Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri.

The original Sid Meier's Civilization – the surprise hit game that launched a thousand imitations

Sid Meier's Civilization II: better, brighter, and just as much of a runaway best seller as its predecessor

Below: Ceo Morgan's opulent office in Alpha Centauri

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Above: Make friends with a mindworm today – that's assuming it doesn't suck out your brain first

gameplay. The only pity is that they didn't package it with the game.

The tech-tree is another example of the amount of creative work lavished on the game. In Civilisation, things all got a bit blurred when they got on to the subject of future (post-1990's) technical advances; in Alpha Centauri each tech development is well thought-out, believable and yet, as often as not, is also quite mind-blowing.

Right. Now we've done with the background, let's get to the meat of the matter...

Alien Crossfire is an add-on pack that changes many of the original game's parameters. The most important is the inclusion of the aliens of the title. In Alpha Centauri, your faction would occasionally find mysterious alien artefacts and ruins littered across the landscape - all very atmospheric, but no explanation was forthcoming, even when you completed the game.

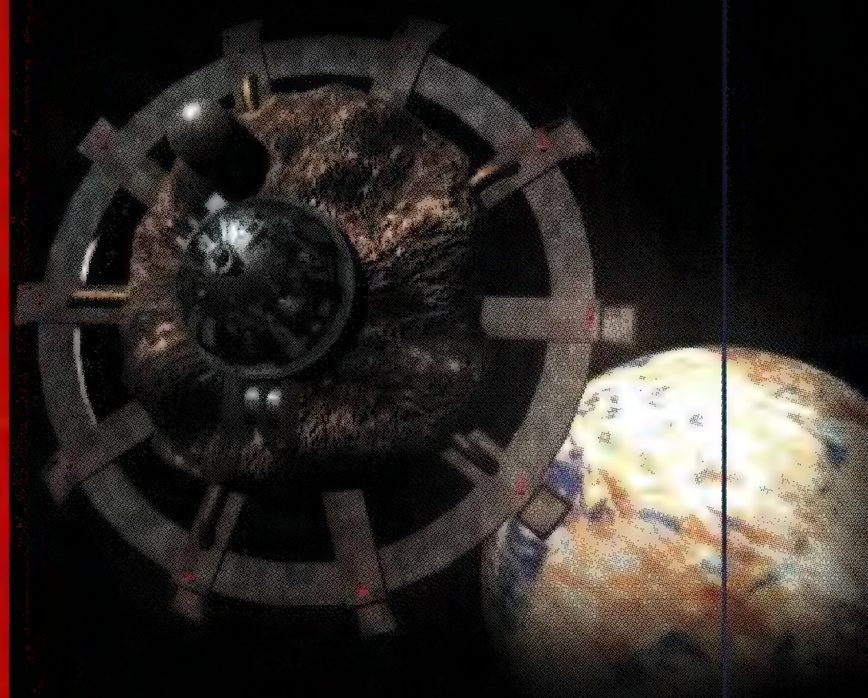
The story in Alien Crossfire is on an alternative timeline to Alpha Centauri. Three or four years (turns) after the arrival of the humans on the place they call (rather unimaginatively) Planet, they see two crashing spaceships steaming across the sky. These are the two factions of the alien Progenitors (Environment Agency types who want to protect Planet and rebels who want to exploit it). The intro informs us that the whole 'living planet' thing was the invention of these biped crab-like species. The two alien groups are determined to destroy each other and will ally with or kill anyone who gets in their way: the human factions are caught in the crossfire.

STRANGER THAN FACTION

You can play either as an alien group, as one of the seven human factions from the original game, or as one of five new human groups (cyborgs, hackers, the proletariat, worshippers of Planet and a sea based civilisation). You can also pick-and-mix which of the above you choose to fight against. If none of these oddballs suit you just right, then you can design your own faction with a separate program on the disk and play with that instead. The faction designer is fairly easy to use, but it takes some time to get the balance right.

The map on Alien Crossfire sports three new important landmarks: the borehole cluster (a massive alien mine), the wreck of the Unity, which still holds some useful equipment, and the 'manifold nexus' that allows the player to communicate better with the living planet. There are

Below: Orbital platforms can provide food, resources, energy or defend cities against planetbuster missiles

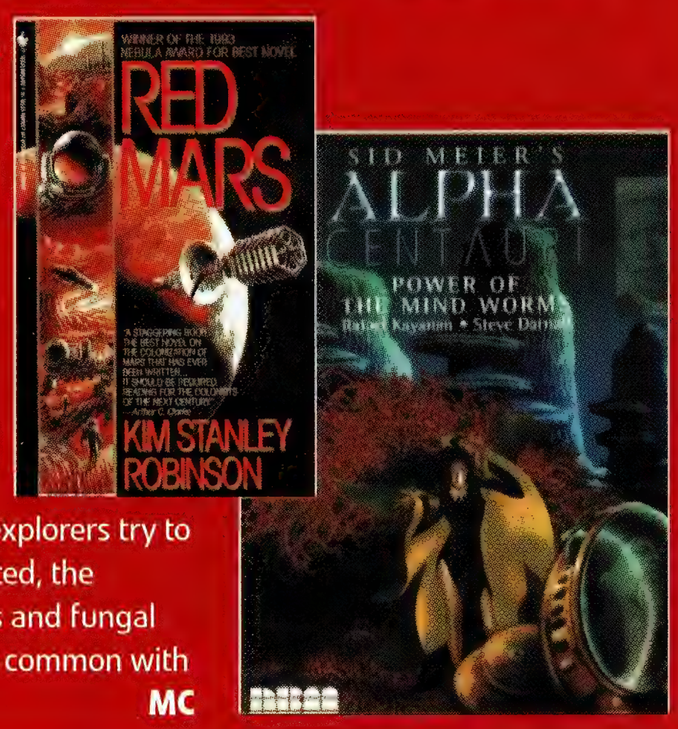


Colonisation for dummies

One of the best things about Alpha Centauri and its sort-of-sequel, Alien Crossfire, is the background material which Firaxis has created to extend the whole idea beyond just a game. If you go to the Firaxis website - www.firaxis.com - you'll find an Alpha Centauri novella which fleshes out the story of the ill-fated human expedition to Planet, while an Alpha Centauri graphic novel has just been launched in the US and is available from Amazon.com.

But if you're an Alpha Centauri fan who wants to bone up on the story behind the game, be warned: there is at least one science fiction novel out there called Alpha Centauri that has nothing at all to do with Firaxis' game. Written by William Barton and Michael Capobianco and published in July 1997 by Avon Books, the story concerns a mission to Alpha Centauri in the late 23rd century. The Solar System's population has hit 200 billion, and the human race faces extinction if new living space is not found soon. But the crew of the starship Mother Night carry with them a terrorist viral plague which renders women sterile. Very strange and bleak book, which features some extremely weird sex (and rather too much of it).

On the other hand, while it's nothing to do with Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri, one of the best fiction series about colonising a new world has to be Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy (Red Mars, Green Mars and Blue Mars). Robinson's exploration of the issues which the colonisation of a new world raises is masterful, and there are plenty of parallels with the colonisation of Alpha Centauri's Planet - terraforming on a huge scale, technological advances leading to effectively new human species and the hidden war between the various factions. The Mars trilogy also features the conflict with the government of an overcrowded Earth, which the colonists of Alpha Centauri are mercifully freed from by distance - but Mars, unlike Planet, has no indigenous lifeforms nor alien caretakers.



If you're looking for something a bit more related to Alien Crossfire, however, then the closest thing could be Larry Niven's Ringworld series in which human (and non-human) explorers try to understand the enigma of a completely artificial world. Granted, the ringworld itself is already inhabited by more than just fungus and fungal lifeforms, but the mysterious Protectors seem to have a lot in common with the Manifold 6 Caretakers of Alien Crossfire. **MC**

New factions

In Alpha Centauri, the seven factions were well thought out, but predictable: the pugnacious Spartans, the God-bothering Believers, the bureaucratic UN Peacekeepers, the tree-hugging Gaians, the totalitarian Hive, the rationalist University, and the capitalist Morgan Industries. A brisk canter through most modern belief systems, but it created a problem: what new factions to put into Alien Crossfire? They've risen to the occasion, inventing futuristic belief systems...

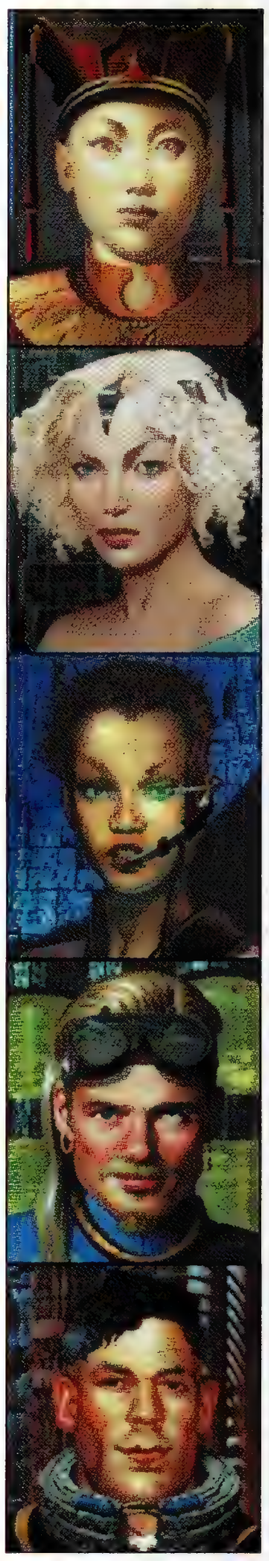
The Free Drones are socialists. The plot of Alpha Centauri is mildly pessimistic, not to say cynical. Even the more enlightened groups have a downtrodden worker underclass, the drones. In Alien Crossfire, these have formed a workers' paradise. Their industrial power is better even than Morgan Industries but their scientific research is very slow.

The Cult of Planet marries the Gaians and the Lord's Believers. Their leader, Cha Dawn, a child who was 'found in the fungus by ecological malcontents', has a high affinity with the semi-sentient Planet, so the Cult has the least trouble with mindworm attacks and gets a free Biology Labs as soon as they develop the right technologies. On the other hand, they're going nowhere with industry and economics.

The Cybernetic Consciousness is the creepy cyborg faction. Their leader is the enigmatic Zeta-5, a young lady with an artificial intelligence program plugged into her head. Her followers have the same implant, so the faction has a high efficiency and research rating, but slow growth because machines aren't prone to casual sex. For those who think Spock was the best character in Star Trek.

SENTENCES
strive towards the Utopian ideal
liberate all conscious beings to live free and happy lives
destroying all we have worked for in a slough of hedonism
making us all drunk and naked and getting us to lie in a great big plie
reduce the human population of this world into mindless slavery to fun
having fun with the wine-soaked fools who chose to follow him
getting drunk and naked and lying in a great big pile with your debauched follow
preaching fun, fun, fun
mindless hedonism
debauched partying
hedonistic excesses
bribe (or
getting your population pleasantly hammered
my heavys
all laws of decency (well done)
You spend your time getting drunk and naked and lying in a great big pile with your debauched followers
Faction
Leader
Rules
Diplomacy
Datalinks
Sentences
Base Names
Seabase Names
New Faction
Save Faction
Load Faction
Quit

Above: The faction designer: Damon Wilson's tribe of fun loving cannibals



The Data Angels are a faction of hackers, so presumably their bases are built out of old pizza boxes, dirty laundry and pirate videos of The Matrix. They're an anarchic bunch and are more likely to riot. To balance this, they automatically 'acquire' any technology possessed by three other factions and their probe teams are cheap and very efficient. **The Nautilus Pirates,** the spiritual children of Jacques Cousteau and Captain Blackbeard, start the game with sea bases rather than land bases and get sea colony units automatically. They can also get minerals from marine areas that other faction can only farm, they get free naval yards and their troops are savage maritime scrappers. But they are low on efficiency and population growth.

Then there are the two alien factions. The new timeline reveals that Planet is a giant experiment by a crab-like race called the Progenitors. They call the planet Manifold 6. The Caretakers think Planet is sentient and want to protect it against exploitation. The Usurpers are a warlike sect who think Planet could give them god-like powers. They shot each others ships out of the sky, and both are marooned and reduced to scrabbling for survival. Neither is very pleased to find Manifold 6 infested with ugly shell-less bipeds, but will tolerate or even ally with the humans to kill off the other alien faction.

The alien factions have certain advantages. They are slightly more technologically advanced than the humans and can choose what they will research next, rather than take pot luck as the humans have to. Their units can see one space further in every direction and bases come with free Recycling Tanks. Finally, they gain an extra energy point per turn for each facility they have at each base.

The Caretakers' sole special ability is defensive. They get a 50% bonus if attacked, but not if attacking. The Usurpers are Progenitor Nazis. They get a plus on morale and a 25% boost when attacking thanks to their warrior creed.

So, now you know all about the new factions, I suggest you ignore them. The faction designer can provide hours of fun, and I'm sure you can come up a rabble as bizarre as any of the above. I did. **DW**

Barry Ryan says... 8/10

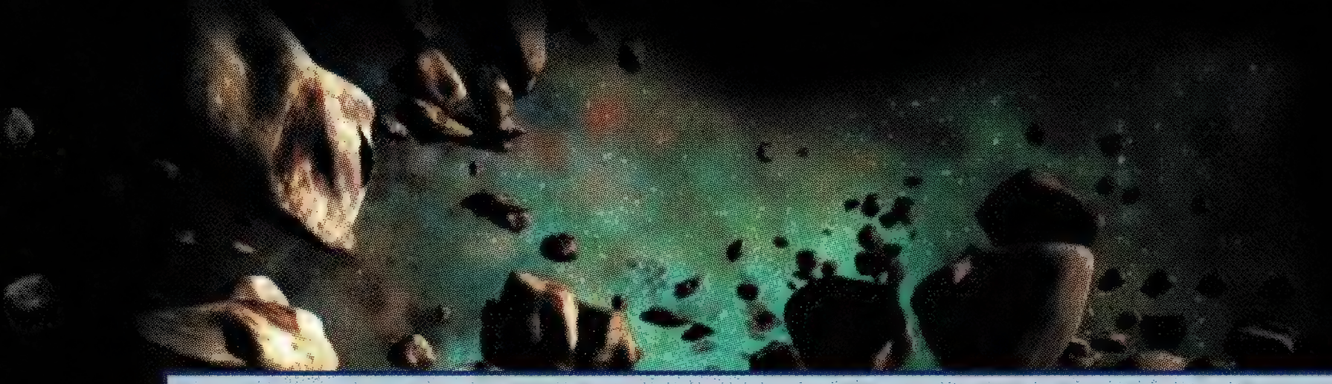
Alien Crossfire is sold as an expansion pack for Alpha Centauri, and indeed to play it you need an installation of Centauri on your drive. But that's where Alien Crossfire diverges from the traditional expansion pack. It not only expands the possibilities of Alpha Centauri, it alters the gameplay to such a fundamental extent that, to my mind, it's impossible to return to the original once you've experienced Crossfire's sinuous charms.

When you first load up, you've got to recalibrate your brain. Instead of the usual commercially exploitative rehashing that goes into most add-ons, Firaxis have created a quality product. It's about as close as you'll get to a sequel without actually sticking "Alpha Centauri 2" on the box.

This is also about the only add-on I can think of which employs an alternate timeline device, an option much loved by sci-fi writers everywhere to justify insane or simply 'pants' developments in story or plot. Any long-suffering viewers of the various Star-Trek franchises will know what I'm on about. But in this case it works well, and gives us a whole new narrative basis. The addition of the alien races and the new routes to victory fundamentally transform the gamescape.

It appears that Firaxis have also done the unthinkable and actually given the gaming public a number of items from their 'things we wish Alpha Centauri had' list. The faction editor is a case in point. You can now create and command a faction of your own devising. Here in the PCSG office, we've been variously experimenting with the rather wishy-washy Wilson's liberals and my own creation, The Tuatha O'Riain, an ethno-Irish outfit set to save civilisation through their unique ability to combine the finer pursuits in life with a healthy penchant for violence.

In short, I heartily recommend this pack. Much more than a mere add-on.

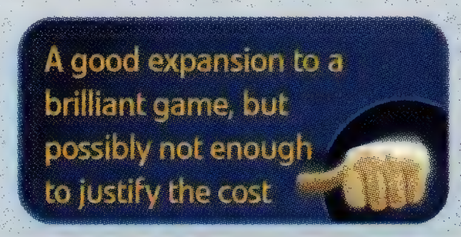


Damon Wilson says... 7/10

Sid Meier took a risk by not writing Civilisation III on the Alpha Centauri box – and it cost him in sales figures. The game was also hit by the decision to design the play map in muddy browns and greens, so a lot of those who tried the demo were put off by the dowdy look. Alien Crossfire is aimed at a rather specialised audience, clued-up enough to know that Alpha Centauri would be Civilisation in space, and persistent enough to find the brilliant game hidden beneath the dull surface. If you are one of the lucky few, you will probably enjoy Alien Crossfire. Unfortunately, the alternative-timeline plot is more or less the same as in the original game and may give you a bad sense of been-there-done-that. However, the new factions – and especially the civil warring aliens – add some interesting twists. The new technologies are mostly based around the alien incursion (for example, you can't communicate with them until you find out how to translate their non-vocal language) and all the new units are aliens. The new secret projects seem to be ideas that didn't make it into the original game, but they work well for all that.

The faction developer is what I liked best in Alien Crossfire. Nothing adds lustre to a game like being able to put in your own little touches; I had great fun designing a Hedonist faction. You are allowed to fiddle with every aspect of their character, but it can be fiendishly difficult to get the balance right.

In the end, if you've already played Alpha Centauri all the way through, you may feel that Alien Crossfire doesn't change the game enough to justify the extra expense. Try the demo on this month's cover disk and see what you think. If you've never played Alpha Centauri, have a look as well: you don't know what you've been missing.



also several new types of native waiting to viciously attack your people and, obviously, new graphics for the alien units and the new factions' towns. The pack also adds nine new discoveries to the tech-tree, several types of alien weapon and armour, eight new town facilities and four new secret projects.

The native life of Planet has been boosted in the add-on pack. In the original, there were Mindworm Boils, Isles of the Deep and Locusts of Chiron. Now you will also run into Spore Launchers (Planet's answer to artillery units), underwater Sealurks, and Spore Towers. These are harmless if unmolested, but lethal if attacked. They can act as excellent natural border defences, since Artificial Intelligence players will invariably attack them on their way to having a pop at you, and generally get creamed in the process.

A clever new strategic twist has been added in Alien Crossfire. In Alpha Centauri, if a faction lost its last base, its leader, depending on the rule settings, either escaped to found a new base from scratch, or was captured, viciously tortured and dumped out of the game. Now, if a computer opponent gets bagged, they are held in the conquering faction's main base. If another player manages to get a probe team through, they can spring the captured leader who will scarper to found a new base, from when on he will abjectly serve the brave rescuer.

All in all, it's a reasonable if not exceptional number of improvements for an add-on pack. The game looks more or less the same as before, but the addition of the alien and new human factions (not to mention the power to create your own whacko group) makes a significant if subtle change to the style of play. PCSG

Above: **Planet is pretty red at the start, but stick with it and it will bloom at last**

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	7	COMPLEXITY	5
SOUND FX	8	INTERFACE	9
MUSIC	8	MULTIPLAY	8
CHALLENGE	5	SUPPORT	8
REALISM	4	GAMEPLAY	5

Conclusion An excellent add-on for Alpha Centauri, with interesting new factions and faction generator to keep you amused for hours. Possibly not for those who have finished the original, though

8/10

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Diplomacy

Yet another 40-year-old classic boardgame converted by Hasbro. But, as ***Damon Wilson*** *explains, not as successfully as Risk*

DEVELOPER: MICROPROSE **PUBLISHER:** HASBRO INTERACTIVE
SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Pentium 166MHz • Win 95/98 • 8X CD-ROM • 32Mb RAM • 70Mb Hard Drive • 2Mb video RAM minimum • Win 95/98 compatible soundcard • Direct X version 7

Above: Before you write your orders, you'll meet up with your rivals In the conference room and lie to them

Diplomacy is one of the best-loved board games of the past 30 years amongst gamers, but it's never been a big hit with the general public. Only a relative few have tried it, and even less took to it. The remaining few, however, border on the fanatical in their love of the game.

Diplomacy has always received a cautious and/or mixed reception because it has a reputation of a) being very difficult to win and b) ending previously firm friendships.

Before we look at Microprose's computer conversion of the game, here's a swift run down on the basic rules of the original.

Up to, and preferably exactly seven, players control the major nation states in Europe at the end of the 19th century: Britain, France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, Russia, Italy and Turkey. They play on a map of the continent, which runs from Western Russia to Portugal and from Iceland to North Africa. This is divided into 66 areas (19 sea and ocean spaces and 47 land ones). The areas are variously sized and shaped, but the important thing is their position and how many other spaces they border. Finally, some areas are supply centres, marked as simple dots. It is over these that a lot of game blood will be spilled.

Each player starts with an army or fleet unit for every supply base they hold at the beginning of the game: six countries get three each, while Russia gets four. The game year consists of two turns, Spring and Autumn. Supply centres only change hands if they are occupied by someone other than their current owner at the end of an Autumn turn. Following each Autumn, supply bases are re-counted. If a country has more centres than units, it can build extra ones, one for each excess supply centre. If it has less centres than units, it must lose pieces.

The ultimate aim is to use your armies and navies to conquer most of the map. But what makes Diplomacy such a successful game is that, like chess, there is no element of chance, such as dice. Conflicts are won by the side with the most units committed – and units of different countries can help each other. The skill is to convince other players – including those you may have just been attacking – that it is somehow in their interests to help you.

Left: About the best thing in the game are the black and white intro sequences

BARRY RYAN SAYS... 4/10

You will, no doubt, have noted our in-depth Risk II review. That game confounded my expectations and forced me to re-assess my jaundiced position on direct board game conversions. No such luck with Diplomacy. On the whole it's a rather lacklustre affair which fails miserably to capture the original's essence. The AI is mediocre and the diplomacy element, the hinge around which the game pivots, is woeful. The interface is cumbersome and contributes considerably to the sense of frustration which I found building during any prolonged session. The fact that Risk II is so good merely serves to bring the shortcomings of Diplomacy into even sharper relief. When you see what the developers of Risk II have managed to achieve with a classic boardgame conversion, there really is little excuse for this rather slipshod offering.

Frustrating and unrewarding. An object lesson in how not to convert a boardgame

DAMON WILSON SAYS... 5/10

I had great hopes of this conversion for two reasons. Firstly, Diplomacy is one of the greatest board games ever created. Secondly, if the game designers could pull it off successfully it would mean that they had created an AI system that it would be worth walking ten miles to see. I was sadly disappointed. The AI on the hardest setting is weedy; I've invariably thrashed it within a few turns, and I'm only a mediocre player. They also seemed to have skimped on the frills. There are no alternative maps to play on and the negotiation section is a bad joke. You spend all your time chasing delegates like the Keystone Cops and nothing ever comes of attempted alliances. The score below is for single player mode – it would be higher if you are going to play multiplay with no AI players (at least the AI does a good job of games-mastering).

A very sad disappointment. Here's hoping Diplomacy 2 works out better

MARTIN CROFT SAYS 4/10

In my early teens, Diplomacy ruled my life – I played it at school (both during lessons and in breaks), I played it at home, I played it by post. And despite the fact that I haven't had a game of it in 15 years, I loaded up Hasbro's PC version with trembling hands. They still are trembling – but where they were trembling with anticipation, now it's disgust, or even rage. It's astonishingly disappointing. Avalon Hill should be ashamed of themselves, allowing this to happen to one of the jewels in their crown. Granted, there are Diplomacy anoraks out there who will probably welcome the fact that the game seems completely unaltered in its transition to the PC; but I can't help wondering why the developers bothered. The only selling point is that the PC will adjudicate moves for you – and frankly that isn't enough to make up for a poor interface.

A complete disappointment ruining a brilliant boardgame. Buy the original

The game is less a matter of bashing armies as advancing and retreating entire fronts. You can destroy units by forcing them out of an area when they have nowhere to retreat to, but that isn't the real point of Diplomacy.

All simple enough. So where does the actual diplomacy come in and why has the game got a reputation for being both highly cerebral and downright vicious?

Imagine playing chess with seven players rather than two. In order to win, you have to make temporary alliances with other players to gain an advantage over players acting on their own. This is the heart of Diplomacy – talking with the other players and brokering deals which can further your position.

This is why treachery is something of a Diplomacy trademark. Your assault on your neighbour will only succeed if you have two things on your side: surprise and other people. A combined attack by two players against another will go slowly or even fail if anticipated, and victory needs to be swift in Diplomacy if you don't want other powers getting involved in the war you've just started. So, players have to try and get all their opponents to trust them, not just their allies.

That's the boardgame: and that's also pretty much the PC game. Hasbro has made no attempt to monkey with the rules, and every element of the original is pretty faithfully recreated on screen – unfortunately.

You give your units orders by right clicking on them, then right clicking on an adjacent area to move to. Similarly, when you build units, you right click on where you want to build and then select whether it's a fleet or an army.

You can communicate with other players – and must communicate with computer controlled players – by using a rather complicated system which involves inviting them into meeting rooms, clicking on icons to indicate what you're asking them to do or offering them, and seeing if they agree. There is an online multiplay facility, which spices up the icon-driven conference room system with the addition of a chat facility.

And that's really it. It's a direct conversion of the existing game onto a PC – no fiddling with the rules, no extra maps, no whizzy graphics (although there is a lot of nice old movie footage from 100 years ago), and not much fun . PCSG.

A brief history of Diplomacy

The story of Diplomacy starts just after WWII, when its creator, Allan B. Calhamer, read in Life magazine about the idea of 'Great Powers' as a way to ensure world peace. The article stated that if the world consisted of nations of equal strength, peace could be ensured, as an act of aggression by one Power could be countered by a coalition of other Powers. This was the thinking of the 1815 Congress of Vienna, which established the order of 19th Century Europe after the chaos of the Napoleonic Wars. Ultimately, the 'Great Power' theory of peace was proven catastrophically wrong by the disaster of the 1914-18 war, when the complex European structure of alliances, pacts and treaties led to a small Balkan incident plunging the whole of the continent into war.

William Wiles, former president, Cambridge University Diplomacy Club

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	6	COMPLEXITY	4
SOUND FX	5	INTERFACE	3
MUSIC	5	MULTIPLAY	8
CHALLENGE	7	SUPPORT	5
REALISM	3	GAMEPLAY	3

Conclusion An object lesson in what not to do with a 40-year-old franchise like Diplomacy. We can only hope it will spur someone to do a better job. A major disappointment after Risk II

4/10

DEVELOPER: HAEMIMONT MULTIMEDIA **PUBLISHER:** ZABLAC

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Pentium II 200MHz • 180 MB hard disk space • Windows 95/98, Windows NT 4.0 or Windows 2000 • 32Mb RAM • Super VGA monitor supporting 800x600 resolution • 4x CD-ROM drive

Tzar: Burden of the Crown

At first glance it's no more than a pale imitation of Age of Empires II. But on closer inspection Barry Ryan finds more and more reasons to recommend Tzar

Right, first things first. It's going to be absolutely impossible to get through this review without reference to Microsoft's Age of Empires II: Age of Kings. So, let's clear the decks and be done with it right now.

On first impressions, Tzar comes across as a deeply derivative AoE clone, eager to jump on the bandwagon set in motion by AoE's massive success. It's a top down, resource management RTS game based on principles which will be instantly familiar to anyone who's dabbled with AoE II or any one of the legion of similar titles available.

Strictly speaking it's an ahistorical game, being set in an environment which Zablac describes as fantasy based, but which roughly corresponds to the Dark Ages. In practice, the only indicator that you're presiding over a fantasy kingdom comes in the form of the game's magic system and the appearance of the odd dragon, dwarf or orc, of which more later.

There are three peoples in the game – Europeans, Arabians and Asians – and in the campaign game, the objective is to find the lost crown and unite all three. Different scenarios will find the player controlling different groups, which each have different attributes, traits and units.

Available resources are gold, stone and rock, all of which can be variously chopped, mined or extracted to further the aims of your chosen civilisation. You then go about building up your empire, amassing military units, progressing along the tech tree. You'll establish trading routes and generally shepherd your people towards that glorious moment when they can beat the stuffing out of the poor unfortunates whose only crime is to share the same area of real estate.

DÉJA VU?

Does any of this sound familiar at all? Ring any bells? It should, because the paragraph above could well be used (with a few minor alterations) as the opening for an Age of Empires II review. After 15 minutes play I found myself in a state of high dudgeon. What do Zablac take us for? A herd of ill-informed, myopic amnesiacs who'll keep putting their hands in their pockets, time and time again, to shell out for essentially the same game masquerading under an ill-chosen flag of convenience?

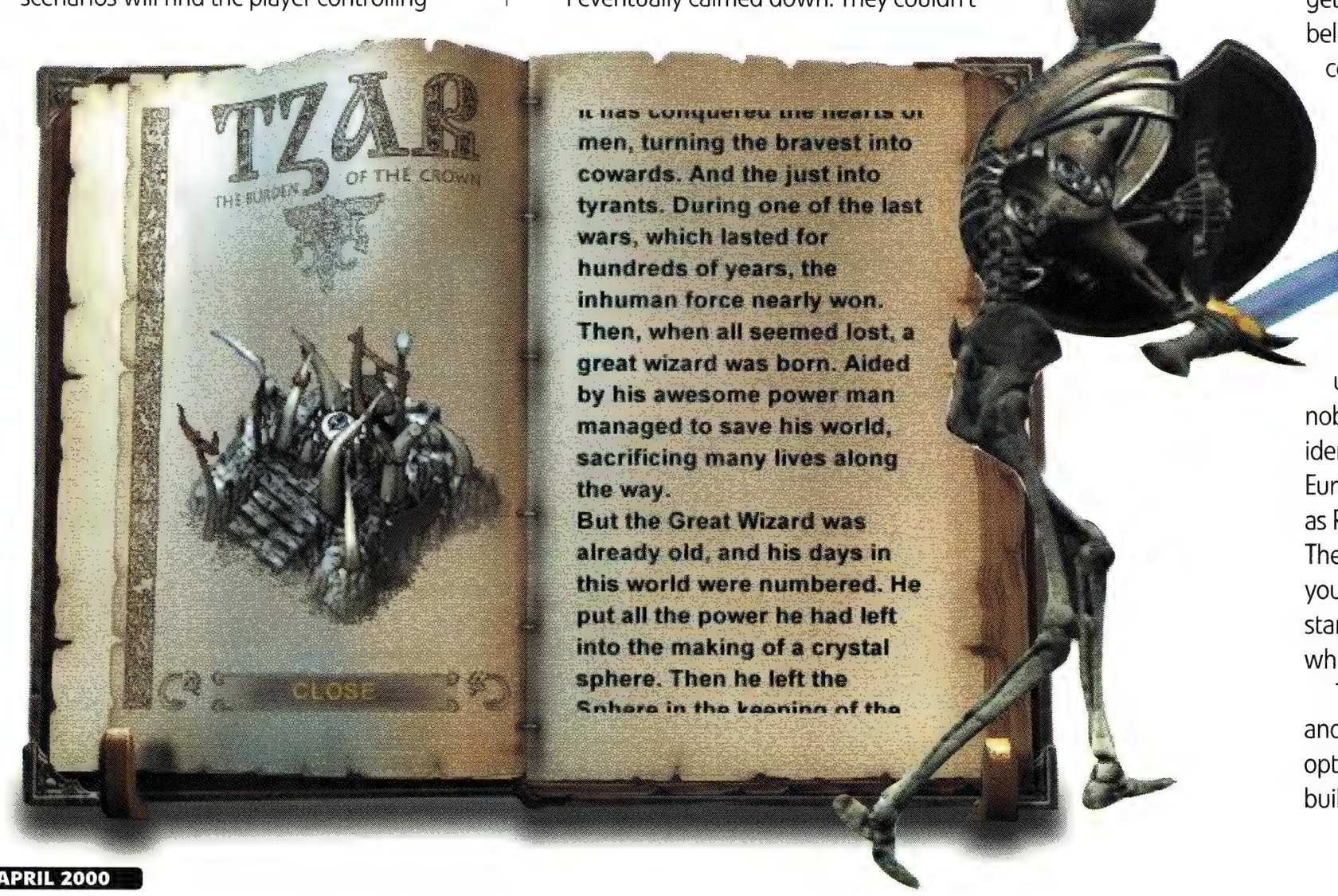
I eventually calmed down. They couldn't possibly be so bold, could they? Surely the game's got something unique, something to differentiate itself by? I resolved, serious, dedicated and utterly dauntless games journalist that I am, to play on.

Above:
The Europeans about to feel the wrath of a proper Arabian Jihad

As I delved deeper into Tzar and got under its skin, a strange metamorphosis began to occur. I found myself warming to it, and at times positively enjoying the experience. You see, for every similarity to Age of Empires there's a difference, and when these are all totted up and combined you get a game, which although ostensibly belonging to the same genre, actually constitutes an extremely different gameplay experience.

I also came to the conclusion that there are many components of this game which trump AoEII and, heresy of heresies, go together to create an altogether more satisfying gaming experience. For a start, each civilisation appears totally unique. From the lowliest peasant to the noblest...well... noble, they are immediately identifiable as being distinctly Asian, European or Arabic. Asian warriors appear as Ronin, Samurai, Charioteers and Ninja. Their Arabic counterparts appear exactly as you expect, while the Europeans adopt your standard knights and men at arms guise which we all know and love.

The tech trees offered are comprehensive and provide a lot of civilisation-specific options. Play with the Asians, and you get to build a Shao Linn temple (their spelling),


TZAR
THE BURDEN OF THE CROWN
men, turning the bravest into cowards. And the just into tyrants. During one of the last wars, which lasted for hundreds of years, the inhuman force nearly won. Then, when all seemed lost, a great wizard was born. Aided by his awesome power man managed to save his world, sacrificing many lives along the way.
But the Great Wizard was already old, and his days in this world were numbered. He put all the power he had left into the making of a crystal sphere. Then he left the
CLOSE

Barry Ryan Says. . . 8/10

Tzar: Burden of the Crown will inevitably suffer from comparison with Age of Empires II. The game mechanics are, not to put too fine a point on it, identical. They're both resource management RTS games set in essentially similar environments. First impressions of Tzar will not be favourable, especially if you've dabbled with AoE. You'll probably arrive at the conclusion that it's a straight-down-the-line copy with little to recommend it. That, I fear, may signal the end of many people's involvement with the game, which is a pity. Those who persist will be well rewarded and they may just come to the conclusion, as I did, that this is in fact a little gem of a game. It offers a different perspective than AoE and in some respects actually provides a more rewarding experience. Unfortunately, and I hope I'm proved wrong here, it may be prematurely destined for the dust bin of gaming history.

An unexpected surprise, which is sure to have you glued to your screen

Damon Wilson Says. . . 7/10

Poor old Haemimont Multimedia (Tzar's Bulgarian programmers). Pipped to the post by the biggest kid on the block, Microsoft, with Age of Empires II. Tzar is just too similar, and everyone who liked Age of Empires will have already bought Age of Kings. The worst of it is the fact that Tzar: Burden of the Crown is a reasonably decent game in its own right, and isn't just a clone of Age of Empires. The game has a unique character and a refreshing adventure aspect. Admittedly it's all standard sword-and-sorcery stuff and the graphics are circa 1998, but at heart, Tzar is an engaging little game. My only real problem with it was the eye-straining lightening and darkening of the screen during play –supposedly depicting day and night – but Haemimont thoughtfully included a button to turn this off, so my flagging sight is safe for now. If AoEII had come out shortly after Tzar, Microsoft would probably taken a hit in the sales.

Decent magic system and different-looking units makes it better than Age of Empire II

Martin Croft Says. . . 8/10

I thought there was something special about Tzar: Burden of the Crown when I saw it at ECTS last autumn – but that could have had something to do with the giant four foot wide TV screen it was being shown on. Having looked at it a bit, I had a chat with one of the Bulgarian development team who was on the stand, and came away in two minds. On the one hand, I thought that if they could deliver on everything he was talking about, they'd have a winner on their hands. On the other, I really thought they'd never be able to deliver. But I'm extremely pleased to be able to say that I was wrong on the second count, and right on the first. It has its problems: the graphics, although perfectly acceptable, are a bit old hat, while the interface is just a bit too Age of Kings-ish. However the underlying gameplay has some neat innovations, and the system seems to work well which makes it highly recommended.

At first sight, a blatant AoE rip-off, but actually interesting and in its own way innovative

Above:
The European campaign – the guy in the pointy hat is your mentor

which lets you have Ninjas. Arabic civilisations get fanaticism and Jihad technologies which will ultimately see their peasants turned into lean, mean mujaheddin; holy warriors to the likes of you and me. Europeans will get fanaticism and Crusade technologies which should ensure there's room for plenty of unfortunate 'cultural misunderstandings'.

The magic system is extremely polished and provides another tier of play. Each civ gets to build Mage Towers which will then churn out... yes, you've guessed it, mages. They can perform all sorts of combat magic and the magic users of each civilisation have the ability to 'spawn' creatures. Again the creatures are culture-specific. Euro-mages can cast bats and Stone Golems while their Asian brethren have the enviable ability to summon a dragon at will.

You will also find, dotted around the landscape, various items such as potions, weaponry and tomes of magic. These will enhance the respective powers of the finder – and each little character, no matter how insignificant, gets his own little inventory. Isn't that sweet?

MAGIC GATEWAYS

You may remember that I mentioned the presence of orcs and Dwarves in the game world. These appear through the agency of the Magic Gateways which are located on the game map. Once touched, these gates allow for the summoning of dwarves, ghosts, orcs and skeletons.

There's so many nice little tweaks and touches that it's almost impossible to list them all. You get to build taverns which, oddly, allow you to research usury. You can then take out loans. The tavern also allows you to hire mercenaries and heroes for your armies. Your units will "learn", that is, acquire experience points. Build a merchant's guild and you'll be able to set up trade routes and acquire the subtle art of bribery.

The game also has a day/night cycle, which sees the sun rising and setting on your empire. The map-maker is sublime, allowing you to create your own map from scratch, something AoEII was sorely lacking.

It's a shame that the game appears, on a superficial level at least, to be little more than a pale imitation of AoEII. It takes a little time and effort to discover that it is in fact an extremely competent RTS and sufficiently innovative to merit closer attention.

If you've bought and played AoEII recently, will you want to rush out and buy this? Probably not. If however, like me you were unimpressed by AoEII this could be just the thing for you. Give it a chance and I guarantee you will be pleasantly surprised by its slightly off-kilter perspective on resource management based RTS games. PCSG.

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	7	COMPLEXITY	7
SOUND FX	6	INTERFACE	8
MUSIC	5	MULTIPLAY	7
CHALLENGE	8	SUPPORT	6
REALISM	4	GAMEPLAY	9

Conclusion Don't be put off by the similarities with Age of Empires – underneath it all, Tzar is an innovative RTS in its own right and well worth more than just a cursory glance

8/10

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build a better business

Lego Rockraiders

DEVELOPER: DATA DESIGN INTERACTIVE **PUBLISHER:** LEGO MEDIA

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:

• Pentium 200MHz • Win 95/98 • 4X CD-ROM • 32Mb RAM • 200Mb Hard Drive • 4Mb PCI or AGP 3D Accelerator • Direct Sound compatible sound card • Direct X version 6.1 • Supports keyboard and mouse

Damon Wilson *finds that Lego's new kids game reminds him of a certain rather more adult game, Dungeon Keeper 2*

Ahhh... a game for the kids, is what you're thinking. Well, you're almost right...

The Rockraiders of the title are indeed yellow-faced little plastic Lego people. In this incarnation, they are cruising the galaxy in a Lego spaceship, the LMS Explorer. Caught in an asteroid field they get knocked through a wormhole and find themselves in a different galaxy. The ship is badly damaged and needs both Ore and Energy Crystals to repair and get home.

Fortunately, there is a nearby planet with plentiful supplies of both; all they have to do is teleport down to suitable underground chambers, mine the stuff and beam it up to the ship. Unfortunately, the planet is inhabited by horrible creatures: Rock, Ice and Lava Monsters, Slimy Slugs, Bats and Spiders. The Rockraiders have to fight these off while mining the planet.

Far be it from me to criticise a national institution like Lego, but teaching children the heartless rape of natural resources while shooting natives who object? I thought we'd put all that sort of thing behind us with the fall of the Empire...

Anyway, in the game you control the Rockraiders as they mine in a 3D cave environment. To start with, a basic Toolstore is teleported down which allows you to teleport in some Rockraiders. These can then be ordered to hack away at the walls until sections collapse into heaps of rubble, which are broken down and sifted to find Ore and Energy Crystals in the debris.

When enough Ore has been collected you can upgrade the Toolstore. This allows you to teleport down a Teleport Pad (needed to teleport objects larger than a Rockraider). Upgrade this and you can beam down a Power Station. Upgrade that and you can beam down a Support Station (which provides fresh air and sandwiches). And so on... All these installations have to be laid-out in a proper, linked fashion, or the relay of energy from the Power Station won't reach certain areas. Vehicles can be beamed down once you have a base with big enough teleporters, and these can speed up drilling, transport and exploration considerably.

Of course all this construction demands a lot of Ore and, for later installations, Energy Crystals. Your Rockraiders have to search further and further afield because they can only mine Loose Rock with their little hand drills. Areas of Hard Rock have to be dynamited and Solid Rock is impervious to all but the Chrome Crusher (the biggest vehicle in the game).

Below: Exploit, exploit, exploit. What is Lego teaching our kids?

Initially, each level starts you off in a smallish cave, but as your Rockraiders tunnel away, new caverns open-up and the map can become quite labyrinthine. The Rock Monsters only start appearing about a third of the way through the game, but even before then, you have to keep a close eye on your wandering people. Certain areas are prone to rockslides, and if any your Rockraiders are standing underneath they will get hurt.

Each of the twenty-five missions has a set goal. The simpler ones just involve collecting enough Ore and Energy Crystals to build up to a certain size of base, but others demand that you do things like rescuing cave-in entombed Rockraiders or crossing water or lava flows to explore new areas.

This may sound childishly simple, but the levels are designed to make completion difficult. You often can't find enough Ore and/or Energy Crystals to complete some vital part of the installation. To deal with this you have to conduct an inch-by-inch search of the cavern walls for any drillable or blastable bits you've missed.

A GAME FOR MINERS

You can play the game from three points-of-view: overhead, just behind the head of a chosen Rockraider or through his eyes in first-person perspective. The latter two are not much good for strategic play, but they do let you appreciate the excellent graphics. Just running about watching the other Rockraiders work is absorbing fun - provided you're as simple minded as your humble reviewer...

The AI routine for your Rockraiders is

BARRY RYAN SAYS... 7/10

Lego is enjoying something of a renaissance at the moment. Somebody has cottoned onto the fact that, for a generation weaned on the multifarious delights of the gaming console, the attraction of stacking multi-coloured blocks on top of each other for kicks, is going to be at the very least, limited. Rock Raiders is a valiant attempt to bring Lego to the attention of the Playstation generation. There's probably not much here for the committed gamesplayer, as the game really is little more than Dungeon Keeper Lite. Having said that, it's a quality product, and if you don't want your little Tristram exposed to the dubious charms of a leather clad Dungeon Mistress, filling his fledgling mind with all sorts of socially unacceptable notions, this may be the perfect alternative. The problem is that you may find yourself banishing Tristram to his bedroom while you desperately try to save the crew of LMS Explorer from a fate worse than death.

The learner slopes of gaming. Should entrance a whole new generation

MARK SHAW SAYS... 7/10

Ah, Lego. Like going to bed while the sun blazed high in the sky and shouting 'Who wants to play kiss catch - no girls allowed,' (I come from a small town) in the school playground, Lego takes me back to my youth. I was concerned that the company's move away from simple bricks into other commercial areas using the 'synergy of the brand' would mean the good name of Lego adorning any number of substandard products. Rock Raiders goes some way to assuaging my fears but perhaps not far enough. It looks and sounds superb, and there's a fundamentally sound idea at its heart that makes good use of the Lego ethos; a number of flaws and a lack of depth, however, do serious damage to its long-term playability. In the short-term, setting tasks for your well-animated LEGO minions is quite entertaining, but the missions aren't varied enough and the construction and action options are limited. Almost, but not quite.

Pleasant enough cerebral challenge at a leisurely pace – surprisingly lacks imagination

DAMON WILSON SAYS... 8/10

The first thing an experienced PC game player will think as they look at the screen shots of Lego Rockraiders is: 'Its Dungeon Keeper 2, but for kids.' Well for a start, so was Dungeon Keeper itself – all that torture and bloodshed – not to mention Mistress – in DK made it very popular with the kids I know.

Now it's certainly true that the Rockraider programmers seem to have been deeply influenced by the Bullfrog classic, but to be fair to them they have actually created something that is very much its own game.

The gameplay and AI work a treat, the challenges can be entertaining, the graphics and cutscenes are excellent and even the music is that rarity in computer games, good to listen to.

If you've already bought Dungeon Keeper, don't be put off by the apparent similarities. Fans of DK will almost certainly enjoy Lego Rockraiders - despite the lack of gore...

A lovely game that will pleasantly surprise those that merely came to sneer

also very good. They find their way around the most complex cave systems with little or no dead-ending and if you order them to do something for which they have no training (like driving a truck or dynamiting a wall) they will automatically run back to base to learn what to do. The learning process is visually depicted by the little Rockraider doing half-a-dozen star jumps: Ahhh, how sweet...

This brings me to the cuteness factor. The Rockraiders were obviously chosen from the wide range of Lego characters to reduce this. They are, after all, blue collar, sweaty miners – there's not much cuteness there – especially if you've ever actually met any real miners. Even the intro and link sections aren't specifically aimed at kids, being more Keystone Cops than cloying Tellytubbies.

Also, once you've started to get into the first level, you quickly loose any urge to cringe. The game is too engrossing and, lets face it, almost all computer game people are a bit cartoony and silly (from Lara Croft's breasts to the ridiculous things screamed by panicking GI's in Close Combat IV).

Funnily enough, the monster attacks are one of the easier aspects of the game to deal with because the game AI often deals with them for you. At the beginning of a level where you suspect monsters might attack you can get one or two Rockraiders to arm themselves. As soon as a monster appears you just have to hit the alarm button and they will automatically hunt it down and ruthlessly shoot it to bits without any more input demanded from you.

Later in the game the gooks - sorry - Rock Monsters will attack in numbers that may get past your sentries, in which case you will have to build electric fences to stop them literally hitting your base. (It all makes Command and Conquer look quite docile by comparison, and you can't help but notice that all the Lego Rockraiders have got the thousand-yard-stare.)

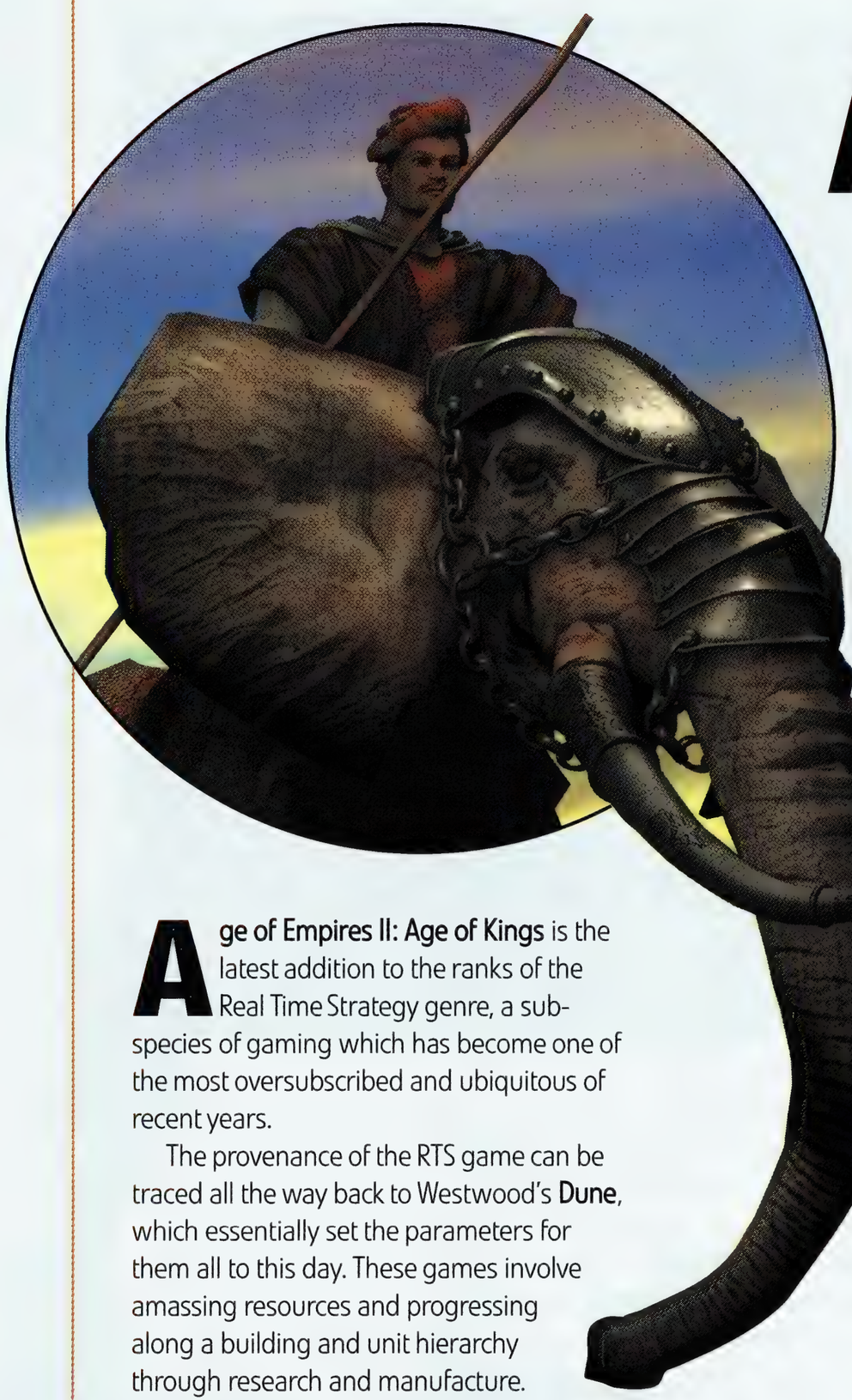
Seriously though, this is a nice little game and quite suitable for kids of (as the box suggests) 8-years-old and up. That said, it's demanding enough to provide fun for even the most toughened adult strategy gamers - provided they can bring themselves to go up to a shop counter and actually buy it, that is. I suggest you try wearing a disguise or pretending you're going to buy it for the kids... PCSG.

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	9	COMPLEXITY	5
SOUND FX	7	INTERFACE	4
MUSIC	9	MULTIPLAY	n/a
CHALLENGE	6	AI	8
REALISM	1	GAMEPLAY	8

Conclusion Much more than just a game for kids, although you may get some stares if you hog it to yourself too long. A good Dungeon Keeper-esque title

7/10



Age of Empires II: Age of Kings

We've played AoEII to death so you can guide your people to glory. ***Barry Ryan*** *provides an overview*

William Wallace
Learning Campaign
1. Marching and Fighting
2. Feeding the Army
3. Training the Troops
4. Research and Technology
5. The Battle of Stirling
6. Forge an Alliance
7. The Battle of Falkirk
Scotland
firth of forth
Experienced Age of Empires players may start with Scenario 6 - Forge an Alliance
Main Menu

Above: The William Wallace Learning Campaign provides an easy introduction to the game mechanics to equip you for Joan of Arc and Ghengis Khan

Age of Empires II: Age of Kings is the latest addition to the ranks of the Real Time Strategy genre, a sub-species of gaming which has become one of the most oversubscribed and ubiquitous of recent years.

The provenance of the RTS game can be traced all the way back to Westwood's **Dune**, which essentially set the parameters for them all to this day. These games involve amassing resources and progressing along a building and unit hierarchy through research and manufacture.

You construct a base, collect resources, and build a military infrastructure while fending off competitors: when your position is secure, you sally forth and trounce them. It's so simple, it's brilliant.

TIMELY RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Command and Conquer, **Warcraft**, **Starcraft**, **Total Annihilation**, **Warzone 2100** and **Dune 2** have all laid claim to the RTS crown at one time or another and the latest contender to enter the fray is Microsoft's Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings.

Age of Empires II retains the approach of its unfeasibly successful predecessor and, for that matter, practically every other example of the real time strategy genre. It's all about effective and timely resource management. Different combinations and amounts are required to advance along the hierarchical ladder, but the basic goal is to extract as much as possible in as short a period of time as you can manage.

While these resources provide the material bedrock for your civ, the muscle power is provided by your villagers. These are the uncomplaining little chappies who seem resigned to the fact that they and theirs are destined for lives of backbreaking toil in your service. Produce them in numbers and guard them jealously. You may love the martial splendour of your war elephants or the chivalric poise of the Teutonic knight, but remember that villagers are the single most indispensable units in the game.

Of course, your civilisation does not exist in a hermetically sealed vacuum, and you'll have to contend with power hungry competitors. While you can buy them off with tributes and abject snivelling, it's still best to develop some military clout to discourage attempts to destroy all you hold dear.

Quote

Villagers are the single most indispensable units in the game... produce them in numbers and guard them jealously

Unquote

Your basic military units undergo a process of evolution as you progress through the ages. You can make them tougher, faster, and more accurate. depending on the upgrades and improvements you plump for. Be sure to keep up with the arms race, as large groups of club wielding Dark Age militia will provide little more than a training warm-up for well appointed swordsmen from the Castle Age.

To support tyrannical expansionism, you will need to avail yourself of the services of the Siege Workshop in order to develop the hellish engines of war required to subdue recalcitrant enemies. If you've played any of the myriad RTS games currently available, you'll know the score. Innovate, research, progress – it's a tried and tested formula.

The naval units undergo a similar process of development. Fishing ships, trade cogs, cargo vessels and war galleys/galleons all develop through the ages with various

enhancements coming on stream. However, trading is one of the most disappointing and under utilised facets of the game. It's certainly not what you would call sophisticated and trading options are strictly limited. You can only conduct your mercantile activities with allied or neutral civs and, unlike in AoE I, you can no longer run your merchantmen into enemy ports.

AoE II does however contain the innovative trade cart, itself worth the price of admission. You send one to an allied or neutral market, and it returns loaded with gold.

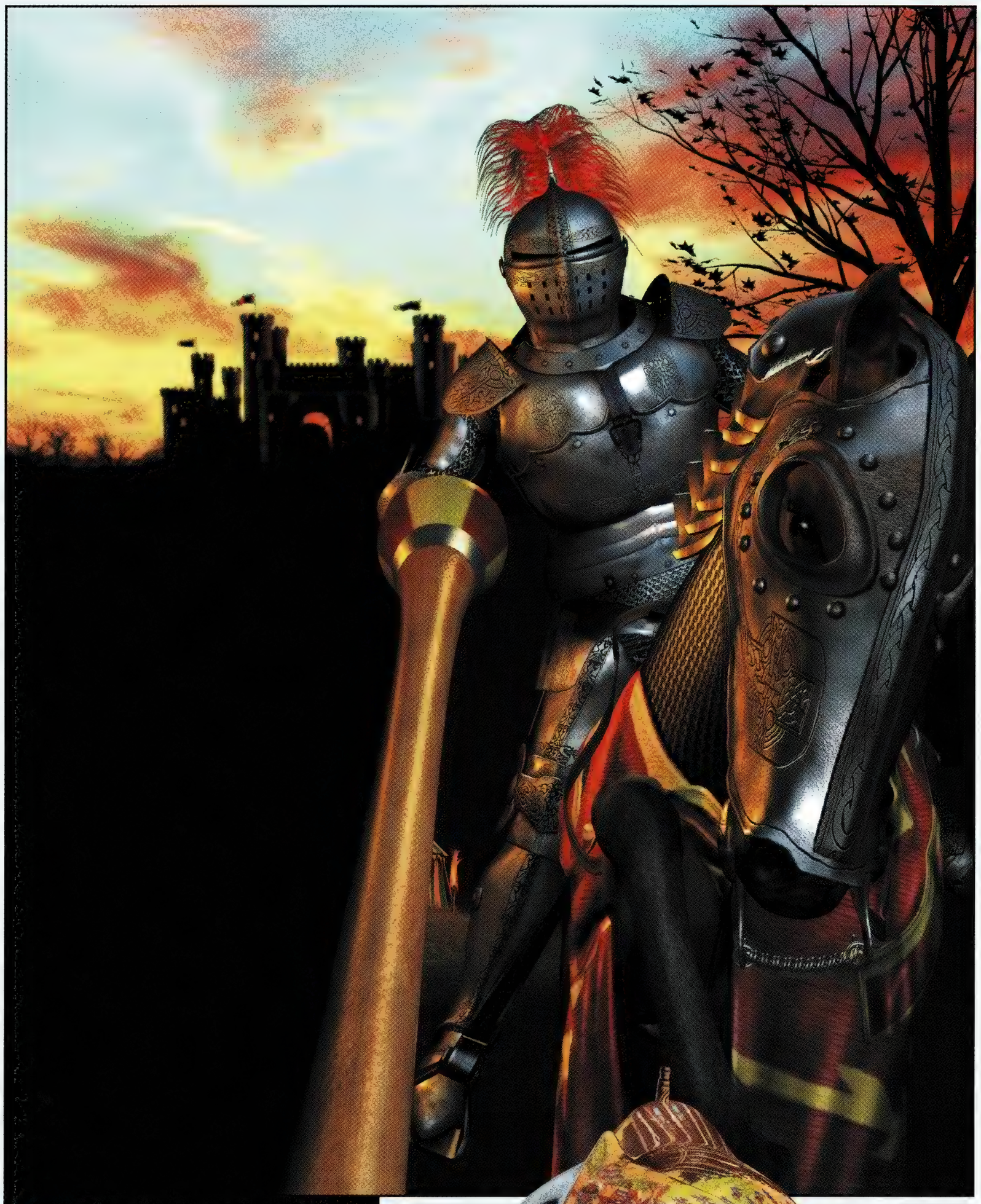
TRADING PLACES

You build trade carts at markets, also significant innovations, because they allow you to buy and sell wood, food and stone for gold. A major problem in AoE I was that you could play one of the single player scenarios for hours, then discover you couldn't possibly win because you were low on one key commodity; the market has clearly been introduced to address that issue.

In the final analysis, however, the trading and commercial elements of AoE II have a distinct air of window dressing about them, perhaps representing an attempt to widen the game's overall remit and try and distance itself from more traditional RTS fare.

In essence, then, if you've dabbled with AoE I or indeed any of the myriad RTS games available you'll feel instantly at home with AoE II. The units, albeit in different guises, are culled almost directly from AoE I: for priest read monk, for hoplite read pikeman. There are lots of nice touches such as the individual civilisation attributes, but it's not immediately clear how much real impact these have in gameplaying terms.

So for those of you who have just bought AoE II – or for those of you contemplating buying it – PC Strategy Games presents the wisdom of the ancients, culled from playing the game obsessively for the last few months. Hey, it's a tough job, but someone has to do it.



Above: AoE II updates Microsoft's original game from the Ancient World to the age of feudal knights and illuminated manuscripts

A BEWILDERING BEGINNING

In order to successfully guide your chosen civilisation to a position of unassailable hegemony, it is essential that you effectively master and understand the system of unit progression at the heart of AoE II. The developmental hierarchy at first appears bewildering, but a little patience and research will pay serious and tangible dividends.

You will begin your stewardship in the uncharted recesses of the Dark Ages. From the outset the game demands that you engage in a frantic process of construction and research if you hope to maintain a technological edge over your opponents.

Initially your construction options are fairly limited. The base structures are barracks, dock, town centre, mining camp, lumber camp, farm mill and house. Initially they all perform fairly rudimentary functions, but as you begin to progress through the ages, the functions associated with, and possibilities afforded by, each of these structures will become increasingly more complex.

THE TOWN CENTRE:

This is the hub of your civilisation, and generally the only structure available to you at the beginning of a game. Now's the time to create the villagers who will

Age of Kings – construct and defend

Like its predecessor, AoEII can be a monstrous time-eater if played at anything below peak performance. Minor mistakes early on can cost you hours of catching-up, so here are a few tips to save precious quality time. The challenge of AoE II is found in constructing and defending your town(s) while building an offensive army. The game allows for a lot of freedom of choice/style on the player's behalf, but there are some things you MUST do to ensure success, whether in Campaign, Random Map or Multiplay mode.

First, scout the map. Discovery of the placement of enemies and resources is vital and many scenarios are designed with only one spot where you can set up your town in safety. If you start as a nomad people or your setlement looks dodgy, send out a non-vital (preferably mounted) unit to roll back the fog-of-war. You will find a corner somewhere with nice, defendable terrain.

On arrival, collect resources as fast as possible. Food and wood are essential to start with, so build a mill with six or eight farms around it (pic. 3) and put half a dozen villagers on woodcutting duty. Stone and gold are needed as soon as you get out of the Dark Age, so mine these diligently. Don't despair if you lack a key resource: get to the Feudal Age, build a market, then buy what you need.

Consider the ground before building defences. Troops cannot cross cliffs, woodland or water (see pic. 1), so treat such areas as natural walls and link them with palisades (remember that you need to get out as well, so leave gaps or build gates). The computer AI is unimaginative and uses only one or two attack routes, so, when these become evident, place watchtowers behind walls on these lines of attack (pic. 2). Three close-set towers will polish off most attacks because the computer AI will usually attack the intervening wall, even if its troops have missile weapons. With multiplayer games, on the other hand, it's a matter of know your enemy. Either way, as soon as you have the manpower, stick several villagers in each tower with the 'Garrison' function. These will add greatly to the watchtower's firepower and individuals can be turfed out to mend damaged defences in quieter periods. Also, remember to use the 'Town Bell' function if attackers get through; your villagers will defend themselves admirably if you let them.

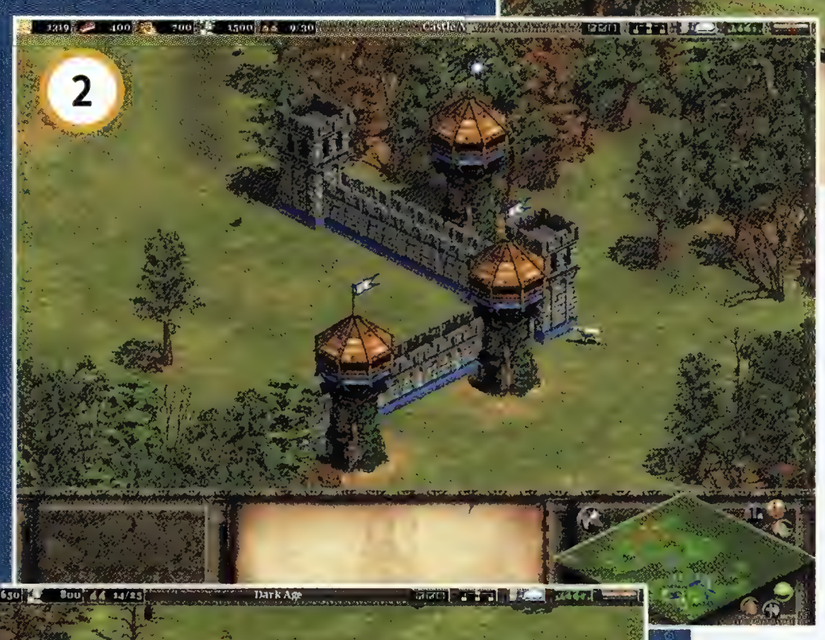
As to town-building, there is one thing you must do before you start – read and memorise the tech tree. It's a pain, but necessary, as the technology development in AoE II is entirely forgettable. As your civilisation climbs the ages it will learn to construct new buildings, but it's up to you to remember to build them. It's quite possible, for example, to make it to the Imperial Age, only to realise you haven't built a blacksmith's: your troops' weapons and armour won't have been upgraded since the Dark Age and they can be beaten into the ground by a bunch of Girl Scouts.

AoE II is at its most disappointing when you send your troops on offensives. The lack of depth **in the combat means that chucking a mob of troops in the general direction of the enemy's key buildings is as** likely to work as the most cleverly-laid battle plans. God is on the side of the big(gest) battalions in this game.

Apart from that, the key to war in AoE II is knowing your race's special abilities and units. The Vikings, for example, can build docks and ships cheaply – so go for sea power. The Mongols, on the other hand, get tougher light cavalry – so build plenty and bash the enemy early in the game, before they can develop heavy troops.

Likewise, knowing your enemies' racial weaknesses can give you an edge, especially in multiplay games. If you are playing against the Turks, target them first; they will be weedy, because their gunpowder-based enhancements don't kick in until late in the tech tree.

Overall, memory is the key to success in AoE2. Remember to: construct all necessary buildings (and, in the case of farms, renew them as soon as they become exhausted); regularly check all of your buildings to make sure you've researched what you can afford; use the 'Idle Villager' button to utilise your workforce to the full; make sure you find and exploit all four resources; build and use trade carts and cogs to make money from your alliances; regularly repair your defences; stop your woodcutters felling the forest that guards your right flank; exploit sea power with ship units from your port (you did remember to build a port, didn't you?); and finally, remember to build an army and attack the enemy.



constitute the economic basis of your bid for supremacy. You will not get the chance to build another town centre till the Castle Age, so be sure to jealously guard the original.

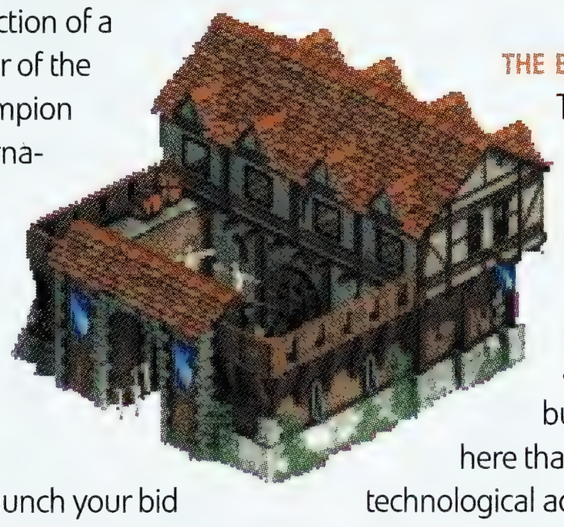
The town centre houses most of the technological developments directly affecting the productivity and ability of your villagers. In the Dark Age, researching the loom technology bestows extra hitpoints and armour on the little dears, thus increasing their chances of survival should a horde of bloodthirsty barbarians descend upon them. In the feudal age, researching the town watch increases the Line of Sight (LOS) of buildings considerably, while researching the wheelbarrow gives extra speed and carrying capacity to your already-overburdened workers. The Castle Age ushers in the town patrol enhancement which again increases buildings' LOS, while researching the hand cart will further upgrade villager speed and carrying capacity. Perhaps most importantly of all you now get the opportunity to build a second town centre, – invaluable for spreading your pernicious influence further abroad! With the completion of the Castle Age research options, the town centre becomes largely redundant in terms of any further hierarchical development. Attention switches to the Castle, of which more later.

THE BARRACKS:

The barracks represents the nerve centre for the production of practically all your infantry units. In the Dark Age the only unit available is the Militia. Little more than villagers with clubs, their most effective use is likely to be dealing with the various fauna inhabiting the game-world which seem to have developed a taste for your villagers' flesh. Indeed, it is advisable not to squander your precious resources on militia; instead try and hurry on to the Feudal Age, where things become a little more interesting.

The Feudal Age sees the arrival of the man-at-arms and spearman, the perennial

staples of Feudal warfare. The tracking skill can also be researched here, conferring an LOS bonus on your infantry to provide an edge in combat. With the onset of the Castle Age the man-at-arms and the spearman can be upgraded to the long-swordsman and the pikeman respectively. Both are more efficient and accomplished than their Feudal Age counterparts. Here you also get the opportunity to research the squire upgrade which sees your infantry acquire a speed bonus of 10%. The pikeman represents the development apex for spear-equipped infantry. The Imperial age sees the culmination of the developmental process for the swordsman. This comes with the two handed swordsman, a devastating melee unit who sacrifices the protection of a shield for the offensive power of the two handed sword. The champion represents the ultimate incarnation of the swordsman and is the strongest conventional infantry unit available. (see also; Archery Range, and Stable).



THE DOCK:

It is from here that you will launch your bid for supremacy on the seas. Dark Age construction options are strictly limited, consisting as they do of one unit – the fishing ship. This unit is invaluable in ensuring the quick take-off of your foundling civ due to the fact that it can amass food swiftly and efficiently. Build as many as possible and get them to work. The Feudal Age sees the arrival of the transport ship, galley and trade cog, expanding your naval possibilities extensively. The transport ship can be used to, yes you've guessed it, transport your units across the ocean wave to further your little schemes and intrigues. The trade cog can be used to set up trading lanes between allied civs and can prove to be a nice little earner. The galley is a rudimentary naval unit, fast but with limited attack capability. Use it to protect your fishing fleet against marauders in the early stages.

The Castle Age brings with it the chance of genuine naval power projection. The fire ship is a unit as devastating psychologically as it is in actuality, and the galley is further developed into the war galley, a more potent manifestation of its feudal ancestor. At this point you can also research the intriguing technology that is careening – turning the ship over to remove the barnacles and other accumulated bumph from the hull which renders it, inexplicably enough, tougher and, in the case of transport ships, capable of carrying more. Our is not to wonder why... The demolition ship, which becomes available at this juncture, does precisely what it says on the tin; send it into the massed ranks of an enemy fleet and enjoy the resulting fireworks, or use it to take out sea walls and coastal structures.

The Imperial Age provides upgrades for the fire ship (faster) and the demolition ship (more destructive). The Imperial Age also ushers in the gunpowder era, which allows for the development of the most powerful naval unit in the game – the cannon galleon – but only if you've already researched chemistry at the University. You can also research dry dock, which increases ship speed by 15% and provides greater carrying capacity for your transport ships, while researching shipwright reduces the lumber cost of each ship by 20%.

THE BLACKSMITH:

The Blacksmith's is one of the singularly most important structures in AoE II. It becomes available when you advance to the Feudal age and should be built immediately. It is here that you will research the technological advancements relating to the lion's share of your land-based military units. In the feudal age five technologies are available, namely scale mail armour (improves infantry armour), fletching (increase attack speed and range of all archery based units), padded archer armour (improved armour rating for archers), forging (enhances infantry and cavalry attack rating) and scale barding armour (increases armour protection for all cavalry units).

As you progress through the various ages, the technologies listed above are steadily improved. It's essential that you maintain a solid programme of Blacksmith R&D or your forces, while ostensibly of similar calibre and vintage as your opponents', may find themselves outclassed in battle just because their adversaries have better armour or attack speed. You have been warned.

THE ARCHERY RANGE:

Available in the feudal age and home to all your archery units. Your initial options are limited. In the Castle Age the standard archer can be upgraded to a crossbowman. In the Imperial age the process of development culminates with the arrival of the arbalest, a variant on the crossbow with good speed and excellent range. You also have

Know your civilisation

BRITONS

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: British town centres cost half those of competing civs. The justification for this is at best dubious and it certainly confers little or no advantage in real game playing terms. The Britons do of course excel at archery and gain considerable advantage in terms of both range and accuracy. British shepherds work 25% faster, presumably due to the 'special' historical relationship extant between the Brits and their beloved herds.
UNIQUE UNIT: The British Longbowman, a powerful ranged unit capable of decimating enemy infantry units, monks and interestingly, the Persian war elephant.
OVERALL RATING: 5/10. Not exactly over-endowed. A defensive strategy utilising the longbowman's range and accuracy probably works best. A must for those with pastoral urges.

BYZANTINES

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: The Byzantine cup runneth over with all sorts of delectable attributes. Their buildings are stronger and their camels, skirmishers and pikemen come cheap. The already diabolical fire-ship receives an attack bonus rendering it an impressive weapon both offensively and defensively, and to cap it all they can advance to the imperial age for a relatively paltry price.
UNIQUE UNIT: The Cataphract, an excellent mounted unit, with considerable speed and the ability to use both the sword and the bow.
OVERALL RATING: 8/10. An excellent option for those who like to play a cagey, defensive game. The Byzantines are difficult to subdue and can more than hold their own against the more aggressive civs.

CELTS

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: The Celts are an overtly offensive civilisation with excellent siege workshops and quick-firing siege weapons: there is nothing in this world more palatable to the average Celt than a good rape and pillage, and the quicker those walls come down... Celtic infantry is the fastest in the game and is glorious to behold in battle. However, the Celtic monk is inexplicably an extremely weak unit. Evangelists should steer clear.
UNIQUE UNIT: The Woad Raider, the most fearsome infantry unit in the game, matched only by the Japanese Samurai. Traditionally sauntered into battle naked save for a golden neck torc. Our blushes have however been spared as he sports fetching tartan trews, thus ensuring that the only thing likely to have an enemy's eye out is his double edged chopper.
OVERALL RATING: 8/10. Powerful offensive abilities offset by weak archers and limited monks. Attack is the best form of defence with the Celts. Possessors of YY chromosomes only need apply.

CHINESE

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: One for the assiduous empire builder. Bonus on farms tempered by an initial food deficit. Technology development costs considerably less, which when coupled with a higher population ratio ensures that the Chinese should reach critical mass well in advance of their competitors. Demolition Ships receive an extra 50 hit points.
UNIQUE UNIT: Chu Ko Nu, an archery unit equipped with magazine fed crossbows. Poor accuracy and range but devastating close in.
OVERALL RATING: 7/10. Their longevity is assured with so pronounced a technological edge. May lack the offensive power to procure quick decisive victories.

continued on page 78. . .

Know your civs (cont'd)

. . .continued from page 77

FRANKS

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: The Franks struggle for civilisation and technology bonuses, but their mounted units are some of the most formidable in the game. The Frankish knight was the Challenger tank of his day and this is effectively mirrored in the game through the bonus hitpoints and enhanced line of sight which they enjoy. Castles cost less and farm upgrades are free.

UNIQUE UNIT: Throwing axemen – very effective against enemy infantry.

OVERALL RATING: 7/10. Again, an attacking civilisation which excels in open pitched battle, and possesses excellent and devastating cavalry units.

GOTHS

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: The Goths have a not-entirely-justified reputation as one of the great historical enemies of civilisation. This reputation manifests itself through the bonus attack bestowed upon Goth infantry against buildings. Infantry comes cheap and their inherent ferocity is reflected in the fact that their villagers are happy to despatch the herds of wild boar populating the landscape. They also receive a population boost in the imperial age.

UNIQUE UNIT: Huskarl

OVERALL RATING: 7/10. Being a Goth calls for a belligerent approach. Employ the tactics of Blitzkrieg and watch enemy civs fall before your onslaught.

JAPANESE

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: For my money one of the best civs in the game. Fishing ships receive extra hit points and armour and a considerably increased work rate, thus freeing up your peasants for more vital work. Mill, lumber and mining camps are available at knock down rates. The Japanese trump card comes in the ferocious attack speed of all infantry units.

UNIQUE UNIT: Samurai, a formidable infantry unit with amazing attack speed, perhaps only just eclipsed by the Celtic Woad Raider.

OVERALL RATING: 9/10. Versatile and devastating opponents, just ensure that infantry are deployed in a manner which fully utilises their awesome speed. Natural allies to the Celts in Multi-play – an unstoppable combination.

MONGOLS

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: Historically the possessors of the finest light cavalry in the world, a fact fully recognised in their respective civilisation attributes. Both scout and light cavalry blessed with increased LOS. Light cavalry also receive extra hit points, which transforms this usually weak unit into a viable offensive option. Mongol hunters work at a very high rate.

UNIQUE UNIT: Mangudai, an interesting mounted unit, which employs the bow to great effect against enemy fortifications, buildings and siege engines.

OVERALL RATING: 7/10. One of the more disappointing civilisations. While the advantages of excellent light cavalry units can be a considerable boon in the early stages of a campaign they are all too quickly cancelled out.

continued on page 79. . .

Quote

It's essential to maintain a solid programme of Blacksmith R&D or your forces may find themselves ouclassed in battle just because their adversaries have better armour

Unquote

the option to produce and develop skirmishers, a highly mobile bunch specialising in destroying formations of enemy archers. The archery range also doubles as a training centre for your cavalry archers, which become available during the Castle Age (naturally you must also have a stable extant). The cavalry archer is very much a hit and run specialist, and even more so with the arrival of the heavy cavalry archer in the Imperial Age. They harry, hamper and harass enemy formations and settlements. Finally, when you've researched gunpowder at the University (below), you can build hand cannoneers, who may not have much of a rate of fire, but they sure pack a punch.

THE STABLE: (RIGHT)

All mounted units with the exception of cavalry archers are created here. The structure becomes available in the Feudal Age. The base unit is scout cavalry, lacking in toughness and best used to ascertain enemy disposition and base sites. Knights, light cavalry and camel units become available in the Castle Age, with heavy camels, cavaliers and paladins making an appearance in the Imperial. Cavalry units are mobile and versatile and should be used to form the cutting edge of any serious strike force. They should however be used with infantry and artillery units in order to achieve maximum success. Maintaining a roving force of cavalry units to respond to various crises in and around your settlement can pay defensive dividends.

SIEGE WORKSHOP: (RIGHT)

Available from the Castle Age, the siege workshop is contingent upon your having already built a Blacksmith. Here you will conceive and build an array of devilish and monstrous engines of war, all designed to facilitate the rapid destruction of enemy buildings, walls and other assorted structures. The siege engine can be devastating against massed enemy ranks, but it is scarily non-discriminatory and likely to cause 'friendly fire' damage. Siege engines come in three basic types, the catapult, battering ram and missile launcher. Three construction options are provided in the Castle Age, and six in the Imperial. The culmination of siege weapon development comes with the bombard cannon, for which you need a full understanding of chemistry – research at the University (below).

THE MONASTERY:

Here you will train and indoctrinate your clerics. They will become proselytisers of the one true way (that is. your way) and will guide unfortunate adherents of the false idols preached by competing civs. The monk is one of the most powerful unit types within the game. He can convert enemy villagers, troops and buildings. As well as the spiritual well-being of your population, he can also tend to their more mundane concerns through his healing ministry. All monk upgrades are accessed through the monastery and include such enhancements as sanctity (extra hitpoints), atonement (allows the conversion of enemy monks) and fervour (extra speed). However if you research only one monk upgrade make sure it's Redemption which allows for the conversion of most enemy buildings, siege units and ships (providing you can get them in close enough). Needless to say the monk is vulnerable on the battlefield and should always be well protected. Enemy units will make a beeline for your monks in order to eliminate the considerable threat posed to the cohesion of their own force .

THE UNIVERSITY:

Makes its appearance in the Castle Age and facilitates research on some of the more exotic technologies available. Study ballistics early, as it considerably improves the accuracy of most of your missile-based units. In the Castle Age,

Above: The Castle is where your unique units can be found. It is also where you build the most devastating siege engine available - the trebuchet

research into murder holes, removing the minimum range handicap on towers, and into heated shot, which devastates enemy naval vessels and masonry, increasing the hitpoints and armour of your various structures. It's also worthwhile investigating the treadmill crane as it allows your villagers to build structures much more quickly. An understanding of chemistry is absolutely vital to progress in the game's later stages. Ensure that you are not left behind by the gunpowder revolution! You may also fund siege engineers and architects. The former augment the range and damage inflicted by siege engines while the latter confer increased hit points and armour on your structures.

DEFENSIVE STRUCTURES:

Undoubtedly one of the key facets of survival and success in the AoE II environment is the building of effective physical defences capable of warding off the predatory intentions of competing civs. In the Dark Age the outpost is a tower with a good LOS deployed as a simple lookout post. It has no capacity for self defence. And the Palisade is a simple wall, constructed of wooden staves, which is cheap and easy to build. It can also be used defensively on the battlefield. The outpost and palisade undergo a series of metamorphoses through the ages. The Feudal Age sees the advent of the stone watch tower, to garrison troops and fire on invaders. The Castle Age guard tower is more durable, but the final manifestations of the defensive tower come in the Imperial age with the keep and the bombard tower, a structure bristling with bombard cannons – more than a match for any would-be invader. Be creative and devious in your use of these assets. They can represent the difference between victor and vanquished.

THE MINING/LUMBER CAMP:

The Cinderella structures of the game. Absolutely vital to your success, but often ignored after initial construction. They do however contain a number of research possibilities centred largely around the quick and effective extraction of stone, gold and lumber. Ignore them at your peril. The faster your villagers can extract and process resources, the faster you're going to progress through the ages.

THE MILL:

Available from the outset, the mill contains all innovations relating to food production and capacity. It is essential if you wish to ensure your minions enjoy full bellies and happy hearts.

THE MARKET: (ABOVE)

The nexus for all your commercial enterprise. Useful in single player mode to buy in those resources you just can't find on the map, they become absolutely crucial in multiplayer sessions. Forge alliances using the game's crude diplomacy elements and then set up lucrative trade routes. The market can also be used to sell off surplus resources in time of need.

THE CASTLE:

The castle becomes the focus of your civilisation in the Castle Age. This is where your respective unique unit can be found and also where the most devastating siege engine available, the trebuchet, lives. The castle also allows for the development of sappers, spies and conscription. PCSG.

Know your civs (cont'd)

PERSIANS

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: The Persians have always been the Middle East's fall guys, their armies a triumph of style over function. Paltry attributes include a sturdy dock, town centre and a high work rate.
UNIQUE UNIT: War Elephant, the saving grace for any prospective Persians among you. Send a number of these into the fray, and it will be glaringly apparent that a terrible beauty has been born!
OVERALL RATING: 6/10. Generally uninspiring, but who can resist a massed war elephant charge?

SARACENS

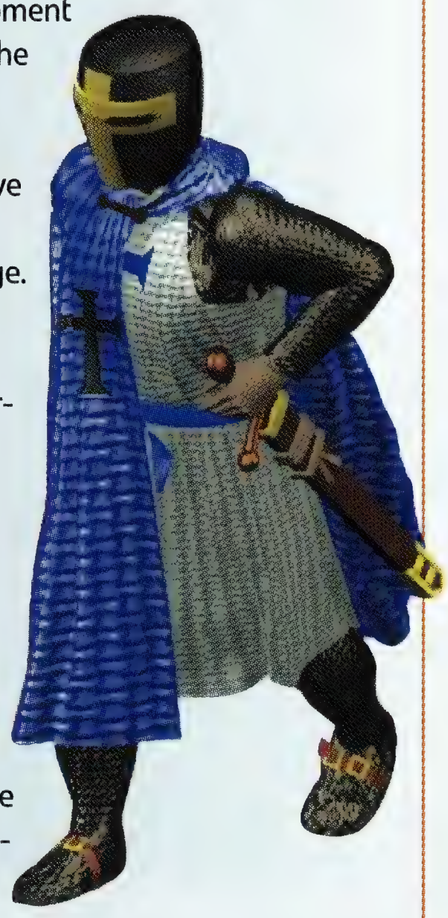
CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: The medieval world's bête noir, demonised by Chaucer and Shakespeare for having the temerity to defend themselves against the Crusaders. Market trading costs only 5%, while transport ships are tougher and roomier. Galleys enjoy a high attack rate while archers receive bonuses against buildings.
UNIQUE UNIT: Mameluke, historically one of the most feared military elites. Resisted valiantly the onset of the gunpowder age, but ultimately rendered as superfluous as the Samurai.
OVERALL RATING: 6/10. Solid but limited. Amass wealth, and rely on the potency of your archers to keep the ravening hordes in check.

TEUTONS

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: Inexplicably given a number of extremely defensive attributes. Towers garrison twice the normal number of units and fire double the usual number of arrows. The Teutons receive the murder hole free. Town centres receive enhanced attack and ranging capabilities.
UNIQUE UNIT: Teutonic knight, a behemoth bestriding the field of battle (below). Receives the Unit with the most attitude award as he saunters into battle, dapper cape draped casually over the shoulder.
OVERALL RATING: 7/10. Excellent for those who like to play a defensive game.

TURKS

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: Their main bonuses don't come into play until the advent of the Imperial Age , when all gunpowder units receive extra hitpoints. Researching gunpowder based technologies costs 50% less, while chemistry comes free. Goldminers work 15% faster in order to fund the frantic development which the Turks need in order to stay in the game.
UNIQUE UNIT: Janissary
OVERALL RATING: 9/10. ...If you can survive long enough to reap the benefits that come with progression to the Imperial Age.



VIKINGS

CIVILISATION ATTRIBUTES: The great seafaring raiders who struck terror into the hearts of many European civilisations. Naturally warships cost 20% less. The Vikings also receive a free wheelbarrow and handcart, thus bestowing on them an unassailable advantage in the white hot arena of gardening technology.
UNIQUE UNIT: Longboat and Berserker.
OVERALL RATING: 8/10. Gain control of the sea lanes early on and cement your stranglehold through your infantry units.

Railroad Tycoon II

Mark Shaw gets steamed up about railways

PopTop's supremely playable Railroad Tycoon II is a fine example of how to make a sequel that is more than simply a rehash of the original with some extra fancy front-end graphics. It can also be a tricky beast to master, but the following helpful hints should help you transform yourself into a gold medal-winning Fat Controller.

DEPARTURES

Whatever the individual criteria of any given scenario, the aim of the game is to maximise profits – so remember that time and distance affect the value of any cargo being hauled. It's better, therefore, to look for short trade routes initially – supply grain to a nearby bakery, for example, then take the food it generates to a nearby city. Such small circuits are a fine, if dull, foundation for greater profits later in the game, supplying a steady income to swell the coffers.

After a couple of years, having your own granary and bakery will be the more profitable strategy: purchasing them at this stage will provide long-term returns. There are many other connected industries (coal and iron shipped to steel plants creates steel; cattle becomes food at meatpacking plants) which can be combined in different ways. It's a good idea to pause the game at the beginning of each scenario, take a good look at the map and work out how to connect the dots in the simplest (and therefore cheapest) fashion.

TRAINS OF THOUGHT

At the beginning of the game, when money is short, reliability should take precedence over acceleration, especially if you've followed my advice on creating short, straight routes. Maintenance and coal costs are often cheaper on slower trains, which are also less likely to break down. Faster trains are also more likely to arrive on shorter routes before enough cargo has been produced, so reserve them for longer routes. Later in the game, when these longer routes have developed, haul industrial cargo to more distant stations, as their value will increase over time – again, faster trains will be needed to offset running costs that accrue as the months pass.

GETTING BACK TO YOUR ROUTES

It's very easy to send multiple trains to a station and find that your trains aren't making money. It's much better to run smaller trains on short, circular routes than go for the big money runs, especially at the opening stages of each scenario. Cabooses have two advantages in such situations: slower trains are more susceptible to robbery, so a caboose is a wise addition; secondly, on short routes, it's still easy to arrive at a station and have to wait for cargo – a caboose slows a train down a little more. If demand outstrips supply, you could end up sending empty trains to impatient stations at a heavy loss.

MAKE TRACKS, SPACE STATIONS

When building new track, keep lines as straight and as level as possible. This will help trains run quicker and require less maintenance. Do your best to avoid the kind of sharp turns and any inclines over 2.0 (in yellow or red) that will make a mess of your trains. Mountains and rivers are particularly expensive to traverse. Where mountainous routes are unavoidable, don't be afraid to place small stations in deserted areas. Purchase sanding and cooling towers in these to minimise breakdowns and overheating. Build saloons and hotels at every station in any town or city that demands passengers, assuming that you can supply them. They shouldn't be too difficult to find: passengers are usually in plentiful supply and don't care where they go, just as long as they go. Add dining cars to every train with w more than three passenger cars. These, along with the various eateries and lodgings, can seriously bolster revenue.

Above: Always check the map at the start and work out routes

Left: Cattle yards will be more profitable when linked to meatpacking factories

STOCKS AND SHARES, BULLS AND BEARS

Another basic rule of thumb is to sell some of the shares you hold of your own company, if you think you're going to make a loss or a small profit and to buy shares in it if the money keeps rolling in. Estimate how profitable your year will be by balancing your running costs against the number of coins next to your trains. Keep the dividend on shares low if your objective is to make

money for the company and high when the objective is to amass a personal fortune, but only if your company can afford it.

Other companies tend to move in cycles, so buy low (but not too low: less than $20 per share usually spells trouble) and sell high (but not too high – more than $90 per share implies that a 2-for-1 split is imminent, so hold on because you'll see your stake boosted in value). Invest in new companies – stock is cheap and most companies quickly make the kind the money you should be making. If you can, buy more than half the shares, you might be able to force a merger or launch a takeover.

If you're doing well financially but need some ready cash to reach your goals, think about setting up a new company. Invest as much of your own money (if the aim of the game isn't to amass a personal fortune) as you think you need, build what's necessary and then attempt to be re-instated as controller of your original company. If you've left a good manager in charge, it should be much the same as you left it and you should be that little bit closer to the end.

Above: Be sure to pick wagons with care. The cabooses have their uses

END OF THE LINE

- Don't over-extend yourself – save a little money for emergencies such as train crashes.
- At least every other station should have a cooling and sanding tower, and every fourth station should have a Roundhouse.
- Use the valuable information from the train and station screens to determine both your cargo and the number of carriages to haul.
- Don't carry empty carriages: either command the trains to wait for carriages to fill before leaving a station or carry fewer carriages.
- Selecting routes is a balancing act, but don't be afraid to divert a train from its original destination if higher profits can be gained by sending it to different stations.
- Don't double-track too soon. It's unnecessary during the early stages and will eat into your available cash. Double-track junctions and stations first as these areas are more likely to be affected by congestion.
- Keep an eye on the train detail screen. If a train promises rows of coins but consistently loses you money, its running costs probably outweigh its haulage revenue, in which case you should consider assigning it a new route or retiring it all together.
- Invest in new companies as they are formed – stock is cheap and most companies quickly make the kind the money you should be making. Try to buy more than 50% of rival companies as you can force mergers or even take over the company.
- Look to profit from purchasing industries served by trains belonging to other companies – they'll be looking to do the same to you.

PCSG.

Incubation: Battle Isle Phase Four

Although some three years old, Blue Byte's science-fiction shocker Incubation is still one of the best turn-based small squad based games available. If you're still having trouble with it (and believe me, I've had to play some levels over 30 times before completing them) or have managed to pick up a copy at budget price, here are a few pointers.

THE HORROR... THE HORROR

There are three basic rules: Firstly, don't send out single units. If you must split your squad, keep them in teams of two or more. This is particularly relevant in missions where doors needed to be opened. Using one man to open and close doors and another to fire gives you more options in such situations. Secondly, try to work out a strategy before you set out – you don't want to block routes with flame or men and risk wasting moves. Apart from the limited-move missions, it's best to move slowly towards your goal. Finally, hold on to your soldiers: be prepared to repeat missions until all your men survive, as this is the only way to gain the experience points and skills to be able to equip them fully. Regular saves are therefore a necessity.

WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

Although aggressive and ugly, Scay'ger aren't the cleverest bunch of aliens in the pack and will usually take the shortest route towards the closest member of your squad. Your weaker or ammunition-free squad members can be used as bait for your stronger, less trigger-happy grunts.

The Mine Thrower's second firing function is particularly effective here, especially against invisible Scay'ger, but you will need to place your mines with precision.

FlameThrowers are particularly useful as defensive weapons. The 3x3 wall of flame it produces as its second firing function can be used to cut off areas or trap the harder-to-kill invisible Scay'ger. Best of all, entry points can be blocked off, restricting the flow of Scay'ger and giving your men a much better fighting chance. Make sure you get an ammo pack as soon as possible, though.

Above: Use the flamethrower to seal off Scay'ger attack routes

Although prone to overheating and low in ammunition, the advanced attack gun's fixed bayonet makes it ideal for combat in close quarters. As long as you've got enough hit points, don't be afraid to just walk up to Scay'ger for a near-guaranteed kill.

Finally, the much under-appreciated defensive mode is actually exceptionally useful, especially in missions where Scay'ger and hiding places are plentiful. Some Scay'ger can only be destroyed by activating the defence mode. The double-fire weapon is best for this purpose – place a grunt armed with this tasty gun behind your front team and set him on defence. He'll cover his team accurately with up to six shots before overheating.

PCSG.

Rogue Spear

Barry Ryan on the proper use of fragmentation grenades

CATEGORIES
PEOPLE
ORGANIZATIONS
OBJECTIVES
Rescue all hostages
PANDORA TRIGGER
NEW YORK, USA
08.04.01 0130
01:14:35
Islamic Vanguard
RAINBOW
Ultraviolent Egyptian terrorist group, dedicated to overthrowing existing regimes and creating an Islamic state. While this is their first action under this name, members of this group have been involved in a number of Islamic militant actions, including the 1999 massacre at Giza in which 68 tourists were slain. These groups, all originally members of the Gama'at al-Islamiyya (Islamic Associations) student and religious movement, have become increasingly violent and less predictable as their senior leaders are arrested or killed.
DISPLAY MISCELLANEOUS INTEL

There are only two ways to play Red Storm's Rogue Spear, the right way and the wrong way. Do the right thing and your missions will become carefully choreographed dances of death, almost balletic in their poise and execution. Foul up and you'll end up looking like the oldest swinger in town, after one Snowball too many, desperately trying to 'get down' with the youngsters at the local discotheque.

Planning and preparation are everything in this game. Steam around as in Quake and you will shortly find yourself very dead. Below you'll find a few basic tips which should increase your life expectancy to something more than the proverbial snowball's chance in hell.

FOREWARNED IS FOREARMED

The most important component of any Rogue Spear mission is the pre-mission briefing. If you don't pay attention here, the mission will be compromised before a single shot is fired. Read the mission descriptions and Intel briefings carefully in order to build up an accurate picture of what's required.

Many operations will require a specialist. Got to plant a bug? You'll need to bring an electronics expert along. Does a mission involve some long range sniping? You'd better make sure you've brought along a crack shot.

Mission descriptions will also dictate other crucial factors such as the type of equipment and nature of the squad required. There are some missions where less is more. Steaming into a reconnaissance mission with a full squad of eight heavily armed assault specialists will, to say the least, prove counter-productive. You want a couple of lightly armed recon specialists in such a scenario.

Above: Always read the briefings through before starting a mission

Once you've outfitted your squad, you then have to face the daunting prospect of the planning phase. Here you're going to provide your squads with a sequence of movement and action orders, which will dictate their behaviour during the mission. I need not stress the importance of this process. And make sure you analyse the strategic map in detail, referring regularly to the 3D view in order to avoid being caught out by any in-mission surprises. Assigning operatives to various squads comes next. Ensure that each squad is spear-headed by an individual with high leadership attributes.

Needless to say, selecting the correct armament for your squads is essential. The choice on offer is bewildering but there's very little that your standard Heckler & Koch 9mm can't handle. Remember though, if a mission, such as a hostage rescue, requires stealth, silenced weapons are very much the order of the day.

A number of missions have a considerable outdoor component and for these it's probably best to resort to higher calibre weapons whose enhanced zoom capability, range and stopping power will facilitate the quick and easy elimination of your foes. If a mission is set in a claustrophobic environment the best weapon is undoubtedly the H&K MP5K-PDW. It allows you to react with speed and accuracy in tight enclosures.

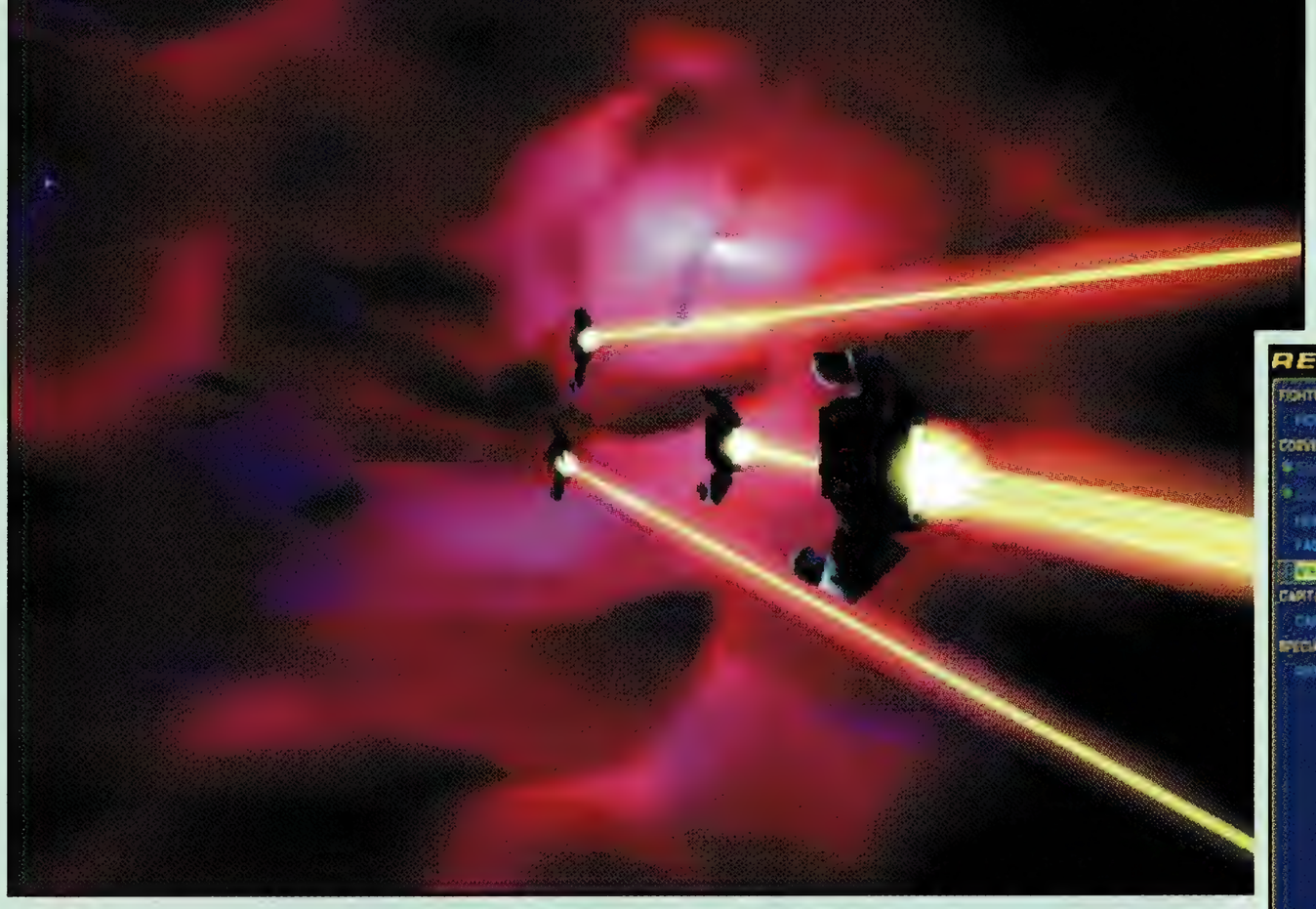
Flashbangs and smoke grenades should be staple items in all your squad members' inventories, and learning how to effectively utilise these items is a must if you expect to enjoy any success with Rogue Spear. One of the most devastating weapons in Rogue Spear is the seemingly innocuous heartbeat monitor. Do not leave home without it! Ensure that at least one member of each team is equipped with one.

SLOW AND STEADY

The way you move around the Rogue Spear environment is in many respects as crucial as the weaponry you carry. It's very much a case of slow and steady wins the race. Avoid wide-open spaces, remain in a crouch as often as possible. Never, ever run headlong into an unscouted area. Bring a heartbeat monitor. Peer slowly around corners. If there are terrorists in a room, flashbang it first, to disorientate them and then pile in with extreme prejudice.

Remember, it's more difficult to shoot accurately while on the move, and if you're running and firing it's pretty much a lottery as to whether you'll hit anything but fresh air. Stop, steady your aim and fire. One shot on target will have the same effect as an entire magazine that misses.

Sartorial elegance does not figure in the Rogue Spear environment (unless you're a hostage it seems) but what you wear does impinge on your ability to complete missions. Obviously poncing about in the foliage in full arctic gear is not going to do you any favours, so do try and wear the appropriate camouflage. Medium armour should suffice for practically any mission, but do give your demolition guys the heavy variant. Personally I like recon gear for the speed and agility it imparts, although you do have to compromise on armour. PCSG.



Homeworld

Lead your people home with a little help from ***Barry Ryan***

Above: Research, resources and big ships – the three-pronged strategy you need to pursue if you are to succeed in Battlestar Galactica. Oops, Homeworld

So you've finally managed to stop salivating over the visual feast that is Homeworld. You're no longer spending hours fiddling with the camera views, zooming in on the various ship designs and blowing things up just to marvel at the resultant explosions. In fact, you are now ready to make a concerted effort to play the rather fine game which underlies the superb graphics engine. Once you stop looking at the scenery and start getting down to the nitty-gritty it'll quickly become apparent that Homeworld provides a stiff test of your gaming prowess. Here's a few pearls of wisdom which will prevent your ego taking so much of a battering that you give up in frustration.

Homeworld demands a three pronged approach. In effect, each mission contains three battles which must be won – research, resources and combat. First of all, research must be aggressively pursued and resources jealously guarded. Only then can you begin to consider the business of outmanoeuvring and outfighting your opponent's fleets.

Like so many RTS games, Homeworld revolves around the struggle for limited resources. Consequently it's absolutely essential that you immediately construct as many collectors as possible. Collectors, despite their rather underwhelming appearance, are in fact the most important ships in your fleet. A collector should never be sent to mine an asteroid field alone. For your enemy, the sight of a lone Collector is like a red rag to a bull. The resources which a collector extracts form the bedrock upon which your production is based. If enough of your collectors are knocked out, your production will begin to suffer and your position will weaken. A squadron of scouts should be assigned to guard each collector in the early stages, and it's probably wise to upgrade to interceptors when you get the chance. Conversely, keep the pressure on your opponent by constantly harassing his collector units. If they've been left unescorted don't miss the opportunity to make them pay.

KEEP UP WITH THE ARMS RACE

Research is absolutely pivotal in Homeworld. If you begin to lag behind in the arms or technology race, you'll quickly find yourself involved in a futile struggle to catch up. Get those research ships out quickly, and keep them working constantly. You need to scramble up that tech-tree as quickly as possible if you're to have any chance of success.

Focus your research carefully. At the outset it's best to either research fighter technologies or corvette technologies but not both simultaneously. It's wise to have one well-developed unit to depend on in the early stages should you have to beat off any unexpected attacks. You will want to get onto big ships quickly. These will constitute the kernel of any attack force.

In terms of actual tactics and strategy, Homeworld demands that you take a different tack than your standard RTS fare. Rush attacks composed of every fighter/corvette/big ship you can get your hands on will end in tears. You need to put together balanced attack forces incorporating different ship types, providing a multi-layered attack. In terms of defence, meet massed fighter attacks with multi-gun corvettes – the best anti-fighter platform in the game. If you're taking the offensive, make sure your capital ships are well chaperoned by hordes of fighters and scouts, who will severely confuse the defenders and allow you to concentrate on the big boys.

One of the most devious and underhand tactics in Homeworld is the capture of enemy units using salvage ships. There are players who take pleasure in forming fleets composed entirely of enemy ships... If things aren't going too well, and your forces need a lift, instead of squandering precious resources why not snaffle a few enemy ships? If you find yourself on the receiving end of a large enemy attacking force, send in a few salvage corvettes and watch as your opponent's attack plans go up in smoke. He'll be so desperate trying to protect his major assets from the lecherous attentions of the corvettes that he won't have time to press home the attack – it's a perfect spoiling tactic.

Remember also to divide your forces and spread them wide. This you will do through the agency of those wonderful surrogate motherships, the carriers, which are essential to your strategy.

Homeworld requires a steady mouse hand and some quick thinking under pressure, but armed with the tips and tactics above you should now be more than capable of guiding your people home. PCSG.

Star Trek: Birth of the Federation

Yes, we know it's a five year mission to boldly go, but how do you get past the first week? ***Damon Wilson*** *advises...*

Birth of the Federation (or BotFed, as I like to acronym it) is almost a year old now. It may not be as visually gorgeous or as story-drive as new-kid-on-the-block, Imperium Galactica II, but as Scotty would say: "She's got it where it counts." (I hereby promise not to use any more Star Trek quotes for the rest of this article.) In gameplay, sweep and sheer time-eating involvement, Birth of the Federation is still my all round favourite space empire game.

So, 'the [Star Trek] universe: here are some tips to help you live in it...' (Ha! I didn't promise anything about not quoting Douglas Adams, did I?)

There are some general rules for success. For example, always lavish presents on the Vulcans when you find them. Their Science Academy is worth its weight in gold once you've allied with them and have built it.

Always terraform all the planets in a system before colonising, because it will greatly speed subsequent population growth. Even so, don't expect colony planets to become useful that quickly, because the population will take a long time to reach maximum.

Above: The Ferengi love gifts (no kidding)...
Below: ...but Klingons love war

Buy manufacturing plants for new colonies as soon as you start them – otherwise it can take ages for the two men and a dog they start with to build this essential item.

GET THERE FIRSTEST WITH THE MOSTEST

Remember to experiment with the scissors-cut-paper strategies in combat: most of the time victory will go to the biggest task force with the biggest guns, but occasionally an end-around manoeuvre will hammer those charging Klingons.

Never trust either the Romulans or the Cardassians, but you can be certain the Federation and Klingons will hold to treaties – until you refuse to pay their blood money that is...

Still, the main thing to be taken into account is which of the five species you want to rule. The game demands a large amount of role-playing, and if you've been running into trouble with your own population it could be that you have been too aggressive as the Federation or too passive as the Klingons. The following guide should help you get into character. PCSG.

The Empires Box

THE UNITED FEDERATION OF PLANETS

These are the ones to play if you feel like being Mr Nice Guy. They don't shoot first, they always offer the hand of friendship – if at all possible – and they wear disturbingly tight trousers. The Federation's main strength is that most minor races are prone to liking and trusting them, so use this to full advantage. Start by pumping money into propulsion research (especially if you are playing in a large galaxy) and send two or three scout class ships to discover as many minor races as quickly as you can. Always remember to maximise your trade income (which should go without saying) and spend as much as you can on gifts to races on your outer boarders. Bring them into the diplomatic fold (at least to Affiliation level), then start work on those closer to you. With luck you will have a reasonable sized federation of happy member planets building up Star Fleet before you run into any real trouble.

If, on the other hand, you are playing an alien race and are have trouble with the Federation, remember to make diplomatic allies with the minor races along your mutual border rather than just conquer them. Contrary to supposed character, the Federation can play very aggressively, but they won't attack planets that have joined you willingly.

THE KLINGON EMPIRE

Why do I suspect that this is the race that most players play most often? If you are a fan of the original TV series, where the Klingons were highly sneaky as well as thuggish, you could badly misplay this lot. In the Next Generation generation, Klingons are highly honourable thugs, so concentrate on weapons research and conquest by all means; but don't break treaties, and forget spying other than counter-espionage. If you have to keep another empire sweet, make a war pact with them, because wussy alliances depress your people.

Your main problem, shared with the Cardassians, will be getting conquered minor races to settle down and stop whining (remember that disgruntled and defiant populations work at between 30% to 50% slower than content ones). Check conquered planets and use the four-turn Police State option as often as you can; this is the quickest way to get slave peoples to knuckle under.

Conversely, if you are hard-pressed by the Klingons, aim quick strikes into their space to liberate recently conquered populations. The freed races will worship you.

THE ROMULAN STAR EMPIRE

A bastard off-shoot of the pacific Vulcans, the Romulans are war-like and conniving to boot. These are a good all-round race to play because the population is equally happy if you expand the empire through conquest or diplomacy. Early in the game, use diplomacy as much as possible and build up your war fleet at home. If you run into other empires, use espionage to bother them until you can make a decisive attack (Klingons are especially vulnerable to General Sabotage because they spend nothing on infrastructure).

Remember to keep your ships cloaked at all times, especially if you suspect that they will be out-gunned. The added initiative cloaks give will always allow you to either hit first or leg it unharmed.

If the Romulans are breathing down your neck, you are in big trouble. Pump money into Energy (shield) research – the first step in beating the Romulans in battle is surviving their first-strike ability.

THE CARDASSIAN UNION

To get into character for this race, imagine the Nazi Party running America instead of Germany. Then use the same approach as you would playing the Romulans – smiling into the enemy's face right up the moment you slip the dagger home – but aim at a more conquest-based approach. A brutal carpet bombing of alien cities every now and then will cheer up your population. Remember, on the other hand, that until you get a reasonable tech advantage, your ships aren't usually up to a straight fight with anyone but the Ferengi.

Your spy service – the Obsidian Order – is very good at counterespionage and sabotage, so aim to soften up enemy empire from within before you strike, while maintaining your own iron grip on civil disorder.

If you find the Cardassians on your borders, expect them to be nice as pie until a big fleet arrives and attacks you. Build a lone outpost on the middle ground, in a worthless area of void. With luck they will hit this first, giving you time to defend genuine assets or counter-strike if you have a fleet to spare.

THE FERENGI ALLIANCE

These lot are the hardest race to play if you are an average space empire builder. Ferengi ships are rubbish in a stand-up fight and they don't get the same friendly diplomatic reception usually offered to the Federation. Playing them successfully takes patience.

First you have to send out lots of scouts to find new minor races then set up trading links as soon as possible (remembering that even people who hate the Ferengi will still trade with them). Get the money rolling in and grovel to any pushy neighbouring empires to keep them sweet. Then start spending on diplomatic presents to buy friends. Research is your next big goal to beef up your pathetic fleet. The beginning part of the game will be pretty hairy, but played properly you should be on easy street after a few dozen turns.

If you are running into trouble with the Ferengi, you must have been playing very badly. Try to take advantage of their weak warships and cowardly fighting style.

Above: Some well-known insignia
Below: A sleek Romulan Warbird

Magical mystery games

Unleashing the creative forces of magic remains a holy grail for fantasy games designers. ***Damon Wilson*** *checks out some classic offerings*

Below: Dungeon Keeper 2 has some enchanting 3D views

Magic: call it Juju, Dreamwalking, Alchemy, Psi, Conjuration, Shamanism or Quantum Physics, every culture has its form of otherworldly belief. In fact, magic is one of the few human concepts that anyone, from anywhere on the planet, will immediately recognise – yet it remains practically impossible to define in precise terms. The word itself thrills and frightens us from childhood. It characterises all that is breathtakingly wonderful, infinitely potent and tantalisingly mysterious... but how do computer strategy games generally utilise this extraordinary notion? As an alternative to artillery it seems, with some special effects thrown in.

There are battalions of computer games that involve magic to some degree, yet there are depressingly few that are genuinely innovative, amazing or even mildly original.To find the reason, we will have to look into a rather hackneyed crystal ball to the arcane past of computer gaming.

The very first computer game – **Colossal Cave** – was run on American university computers in the mid-1960s (over a decade before the launch of what is commonly recognised as the first video game, the table tennis 'simulation', Pong). Colossal Cave was a giant, text-based romp and – given the whole stretch of world literary culture to explore – the computer scientists decided to set it in a Tolkienesque world filled with goblins, elves and wizards.

The first fantasy bestseller to be aimed at an adult audience, the first part of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was only published in 1955, and the genre took a few years to become popular in the USA. The original computer game designers must have felt that they were being very 'hip' and 'with it' by utilising a fantasy setting. The irony, from our point of view, is that neither *The Hobbit* nor *The Lord of the Rings* contain much magic use. Tolkien felt that too much wizardry would unbalance his epic so, apart from a few key scenes, very little spell-slinging actually takes place in the stories.

Unfortunately, in Colossal Cave, as with all subsequent text-based adventures, magic was just another tool used to explore and solve puzzles (GO NORTH ON MAGIC CARPET, USE WAND OF FIREBALLS ON GOBLIN etc.) Of course, the designers can hardly be blamed for this, considering the limited (not to say Neolithic) computer resources at their disposal. Neither is it their fault that the magic displayed in the game was uninspired – they were engineers, not writers – but they inadvertently set a low standard, which was to be followed by far too many of their game-design descendants.

ROLE-PLAYING REVOLUTION

The next major step in the evolution of magic-based computer games came in the early 1970s and had nothing to do with computers. Some tabletop wargamers got tired of pushing units of lead soldiers about unconvincing papier-maché battlefields and invented an attribute system that allowed a player to design an individual person in the

Rings trilogy – out on celluloid soon

In other fantasy news, we have the movie trilogy of the decade: JRR Tolkien's **The Lord of the Rings**. The first of the three movies, based on **The Fellowship of the Ring**, has started shooting in New Zealand, and is slated for release in the summer of 2001. The second and third episodes are due to come out in rapid succession by movie standards: **The Two Towers** hits the screens in the winter of 2001/2 and **The Return of the King** will follow in the summer of 2002.

Hopes are high that these will not be as disappointing as a certain other, long-awaited fantasy follow-ups (naming no names, Mr Lucas). The special effects budget has already surpassed initial estimates and script writer and director Peter Jackson (director of 1996 horror flick **The Frighteners**) has promised a visual extravaganza with hitherto unseen effects and sweeping fantasy backdrops.

same way they had once designed whole armies. A group of players could then take their 'characters' on imaginary adventures using what had previously been a psychological analysis tool called 'role-playing.'

The original role-players, like the programmers of the Colossal Cave, designed a sub-Tolkien fantasy world in which to set their campaigns. **Dungeons and Dragons™** was published in 1974 and changed the entertainment industry forever, not least by moving interest in fantasy settings away from small cliques of Tolkien fans and into the general mainstream. Unfortunately, again, the restrictions imposed by pen-and-paper and the human brain meant that the magic system in the game had to be fairly basic to make the game accessible to all comers. Obviously this is not necessary when a computer is doing all the fiddly work for you, but a low standard had been set once again – and computer designers took full advantage of it.

Over 25 years later, virtually every computer game involving magic is still loosely based on the simple magic system utilised in D&D. This works well in RPG games like **Baldur's Gate** (which is, in fact, set in the D&D universe), but is less impressive in 3D-shooters like **Hexen** and downright pedestrian in magical strategy games like **Warcraft II**.

Nevertheless, there are some innovative magic-based strategy computer games out there, and the following bestiary should provide would-be computer magi a basic idea as to what offerings might stun (or mire) their imaginations.

Warlords III – Reign Of Heroes,
Red Orb Entertainment

A cult, turn-based, strategy game that surprises just about everyone who plays it for the first time. Take control of a fantasy race and a few towns, build units (anything from light infantry to fire demons) and form armies. Then explore magic sites with your hero units and, of course, conquer everyone else along the way.

Above: Warlords III offers a plain and simple fantasy romp, and boasts an army of happy and addicted fans

The overhead graphics are dull, the gameplay is simple to the point of being primitive and the fantasy setting is totally standardised – forest infesting elves, mountain dwelling dwarves and undead armies that (for apparently aesthetic rather than architectural reasons) live in castles that look like giant skulls. Yet the game is completely addictive – especially in multiplayer mode.

COMPELLING SIMPLICITY

There is something compulsive about its very simplicity. The Artificial Intelligence armies can prove very difficult to match, let alone beat, and the basic role-play-style development of your heroes is subtly involving. It looks and plays like a first blueprint for a fantasy strategy game, but can be great fun for that very reason.

The magic aspect, unsurprisingly, is equally simplistic. There are plenty of magic weapons for your heroes to quest for and wizards can cast up to 16 troop-enhancing spells, but it is all deeply uninspired, run-of-the-fantasy-mill stuff. But, since the Warlords watchword is unpretentiousness – and it has an army of happy fans as a result – it would be unfair to criticise it on those grounds.

Above: Spell-slinging in Magic & Mayhem is standard-issue and the production-line monsters lack an original feel. Look for the original Chaos for real addictive fun

Magic and Mayhem
Virgin

Two decades ago, the now much-toasted Gollop brothers (programmers of the sainted **X-Com** turn-based combat series) published an excellent Spectrum game called **Chaos**. You controlled a wizard on an absolutely blank, 2D battlefield. Each turn you could create monsters out of the ether and send them at your enemies. That was it – even for a ZX Spectrum game, it was ridiculously simplistic. Yet the game is still talked about in hushed tones in certain (ageing) circles because it was absolutely brilliant fun. Personally, I place it in the top 10 greats of computer strategy gaming.

Magic and Mayhem is the Gollops' updated Chaos for the 1990s. Here you move your wizard through a series of real-time isometric fantasy maps, exploring, summoning minions and attacking other wizards. The levels each demand that you complete several simple tasks – kill this wizard, find that magic ingredient, release and protect this independent character. Survive and succeed and you move to the next map in the plot.

The clever tactical twist comes in how the player organises his spells. Each magic ingredient can be used in one of three ways, so a plant might allow you to create magic

Right: Warhammer – Dark Omen: Tough battles, but uninspired magic
Below: At last, the first Runequest game – some of us have been waiting decades

Iskalli, a thane of the Kardarvi clan, comes to ask you if you know the details of the "Lhankor Mhy Finds the Truth" story, and if you will share them with his clan. "We wish to improve our ability to move about in the realm of the gods," he says. He reminds you that you owe his clan a favor.
1. Just make up the details.
2. Offer him details of another story instead.
3. "We don't know these details."
4. "We know, but we're not going to tell you."
We owe them a favor, but need not grant them exactly the favor they request.
FOOD 583
POPULATION 765
WARRIORS 9
MAGIC 1
BOLIK
CONSTARAM
ENOSSI
VIKUNNA
BARMGRADUS
DANERRA
INGANNA

armour if used in a Law slot, summon zombies when in a Chaos slot, or else shoot fireballs if set in a Neutral slot. Choice of spell can greatly change how you deal with your list of tasks.

Unfortunately, in complicating the game, the Gollops reduced the addictive factor found in Chaos. Magic and Mayhem is by no means a bad game, but lacks originality in both the gameplay (it's fantasy **Command and Conquer)** and the magic itself (more D&D-style magic missiles and standard, production-line monsters). Search the net for Spectrum emulator sites that carry the original Chaos instead.

Warhammer: Dark Omen
Electronic Arts

The Games Workshop's Warhammer table-top fantasy wargame has survived and prospered for decades because it is involved, simple to learn and fun. Generation after generation of teenage boys have passed girlfriendless hours bashing each other's little plastic armies to relieve the tension. So Warhammer has an army of loyal (to the point of fanatic) fans, and the computer version has a hard audience to please.

Dark Omen (and its predecessor **Warhammer: The Shadow of the Horned Rat)** consists of a series of battles linked by a basic fantasy storyline. Your units are rarely larger than 20 men (or elves, dwarves, orcs etc) and the battlefields are often no larger than several football pitches; so the combat is more tactical than grandly strategic. The fight areas are rendered in 3D, are often complex and, since line-of-sight rules apply, give plenty of opportunity for ambushes, flanking attacks and general military skulduggery (multiplayer games can become quite nasty – in the best possible way). Units surviving encounters gain experience and can be enhanced with heavier armour; new units come under your control as the game progresses.

The main problem with Dark Omen is the difficulty of the single-player game. Lose any men or units early on in the game and it becomes impossible to win later. Of course, a lot of strategy games do this, and it is by no means a fault unless taken too far. In Dark Omen, you basically have to win every battle decisively with a minimum of losses, or forget it. The difficulty factor is just too high for most gamers, and it also disappoints in its utilisation of magic. There are various interesting schools of magic with associated spells to fling but, when all is said and done, wizards effect the gameplay in exactly the same way as the artillery units.

King of Dragon Pass
A-Sharp

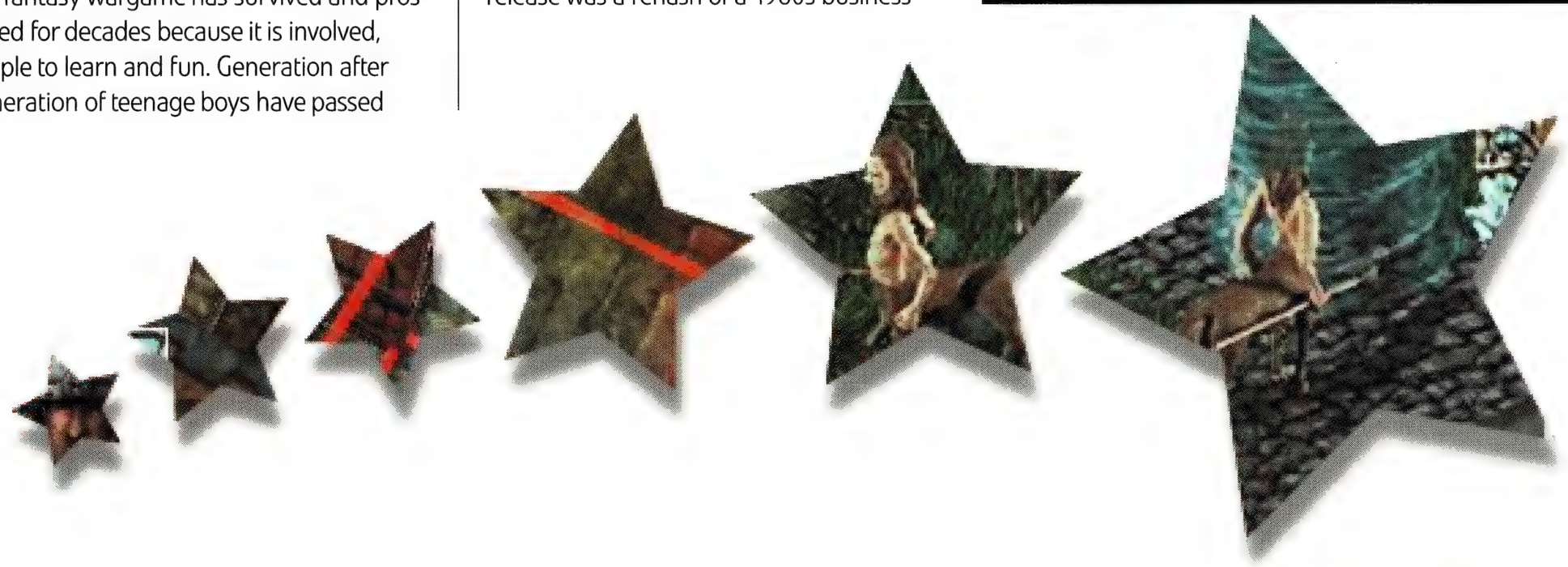
An odd game this... At first sight you would be forgiven for thinking this December 1999 release was a rehash of a 1980s business simulation: no units to move about maps, no battlefields to overview, no direct control over your people whatsoever. KDP comprises around a dozen window screens where you distribute points of magic, cattle, food, trade goods, and make multiple choice decisions. It looks to me about as much fun as an accounts program.

MARITAL PROBLEMS SORTED

In fact, the game is quietly engrossing. KDP is less of a battle game than a king-simulator. The player controls a celtic Bronze Age tribe and, season by season, sends out raiding parties, organises trade and deals with randomly generated situations. Events to resolve range from subjects' marital problems to negotiations with other tribes to avert a blood feud. In each situation, you are given five or six multiple-choice reactions – each leading to complex repercussions and more decisions.

There seem to be hundreds of possible situations to adjudicate and dozens of beautifully painted illustrations to go with them. These allow the player – if they are willing to engage their imagination – to become really involved in the complex world described, while enjoying the pride of command as well as the burden of authority.

Below: Level design in Dungeon Keeper 2 can get more than a little bit complex



The game's magic is based on worship of various gods and their resultant blessings. Rather than a tool, magic is part of everyday life (like the weather) and the blessings and curses your tribe incur affect every aspect of the game. To utilise the power of the gods properly, the player has to read the extensive myths included in the folklore section of the game. This is living hell for the impatient, but if you like being drawn into a fantasy world – and don't mind a plain interface – you could come to love this game.

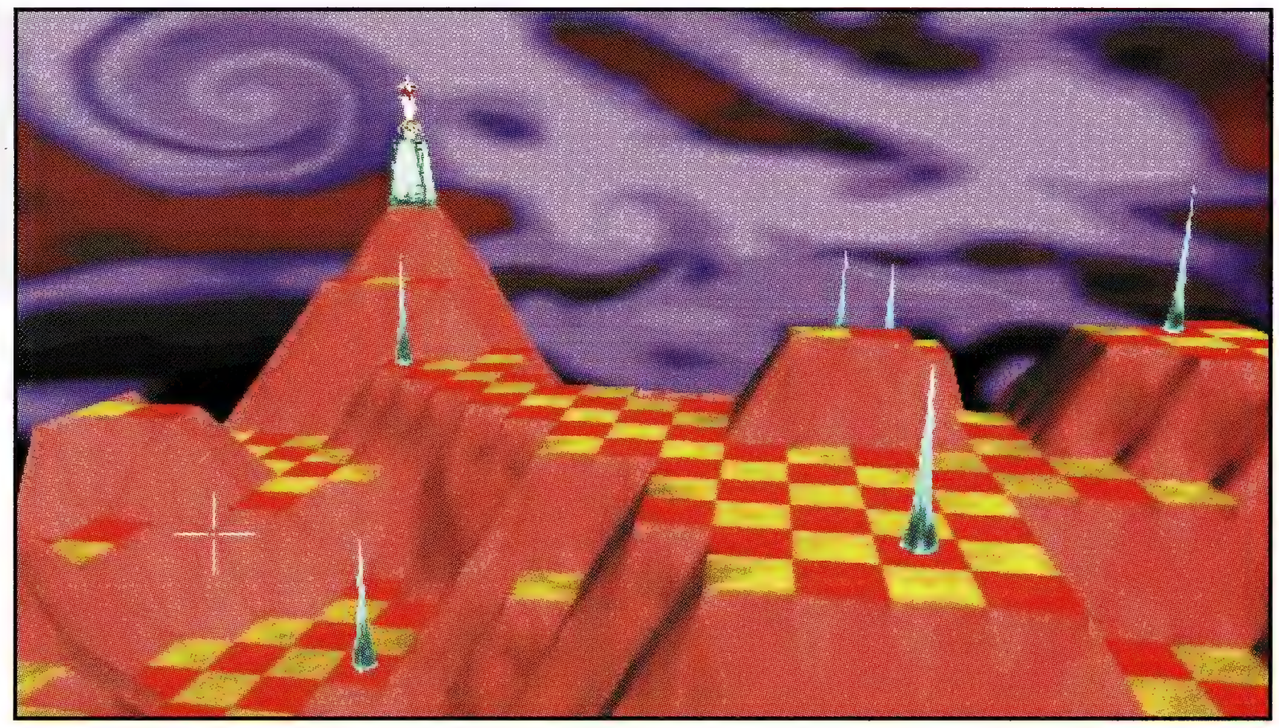
Dungeon Keeper 2
Electronic Arts

A typically innovative game from developers Bullfrog, Dungeon Keeper turns the usual fantasy setting on its head. You play the evil master of a stinking dungeon – in charge of goblins, black magicians, sadistic young ladies in black leather body-suits and a thinly disguised Satan character called 'Old Horny'. With these, and many other horrors, you fend off daring adventurers and attack the underground fortresses of noble kings.

Magic is intrinsic to the whole game. Slave creatures called imps mine out chambers at your order, but it is your sinister, disembodied hand that converts them to training rooms, torture chambers, arcane libraries and so forth. These rooms each have special functions – creatures who die in your prisons become fighting skeletons, temples attract dark angels, casinos can be fixed to recycle your monsters' pay back into your treasury etc. You can personally fling lightning bolts at all and sundry, and, while your minions will automatically hurry to attack intruders, it is more fun to teleport them behind your unsuspecting foes. Best of all, you can 'possess' your creatures and run about the 3D environment of the dungeon. This is meant to enable you to lead attacks, but just sightseeing is worth the admission price alone (the management at The London Dungeon must hate this game).

It's a fine example of what can be done with the traditional Tolkien setting, given a little innovation and talent.

Right: The strange world of Sentinel Returns, bringing a sense of wonder and nerve-racking tension



Sentinel Returns
Psygnosis

A modern follow-up to a classic Spectrum game. You are dropped into a mountainous, otherworldly 3D landscape. The creature under your control cannot walk, but can create new bodies within its line of sight and can then 'jump' its mind to the new body.

Quote

Are PC magic-based games slowly sinking in a bog of uncreative mediocrity and Hollywood-style sequelism?

Unquote

It can then re-absorb its old body regaining the energy just spent. It can also absorb 'trees' (the only earthly looking things in the game) and create piles of 'boulders'. The point is to gain height. For example, you see a handy crag across the landscape, so you create two boulders and another body on top; teleport across and you will see more of the map (and trees to give you energy for the next jump). Your ultimate task in each level is to destroy the eponymous Sentinel. One of these grim looking creatures dominates each map from a high vantage point, turning its gaze like a sinister lighthouse beam. Fall under its glare and it absorbs your energy like a leech. Run out of energy and you die. But, if you can get higher than the Sentinel you can absorb him.

One of the most bizarre games ever released, Sentinel Returns is tremendous fun if you like strategic puzzles mixed with nerve-racking tension. It includes every ingredient that a good magic strategy game needs: strangeness, wonder, bizarre powers and shuddering fear.

All of these games vary greatly in their use of creative imagination. The first three basically use off-the-peg, D&D-style magic systems. The latter three have created innovative magical worlds. In the first two, the magic element could be removed and the gameplay would not diminish. The middle two need the magic element but don't use it to its full potential. However, in the last two, the magic is original and intrinsic; remove it and they would be unplayable.

All but King of Dragon Pass are sequels of previously successful games (and KDP is heavily based in the world of the pen-and-paper RPG Runequest). Are PC magic-based games slowly sinking in a bog of uncreative mediocrity and Hollywood-style sequelism? One can only hope not. There are hundreds of clever people writing innovative fantasy novels out there: can't any of them get jobs in the computer game industry? PCSG.

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It's a simulation of two halves...

Football titles are big business at the moment: but where's the grass-root player interaction and involvement, asks ***Mike Siggins***

Mike Siggins: a lifetime's gaming

Mike Siggins has been playing games for 25 years and writing about them for 15. He is a consultant in the fields of corporate treasury, motorsport and the Internet. He also heads Aethereal Design, currently developing several boardgame titles and a PC simulation for a major publisher. He writes for The Game Cabinet, Counter, G3 magazine and Wargames Illustrated. Between 1989 and 1998, he edited and published the magazine Sumo which pioneered in-depth coverage of European games. His views are very much his own.

I am not a huge fan of soccer. I've only ever been to one 'live' game, don't have Sky, and watch Match of the Day perhaps once a month. But put me in front of a computer soccer game, and I'm hooked. For the last two years, a friend and I have been playing out a league with the near-perfect PlayStation game ISS Pro 98, while Championship Manager is pretty much a way of life at the moment – my beloved Fiorentina are third in Serie A. So what's the appeal, and is there anywhere left for the form to go?

CM is, for me, the best simulation on the market. Granted, there is little in the way of value-added flavour, it often feels as if you are playing with a database, and, as everyone seems to observe, it certainly isn't the quickest program ever written. And am I alone in thinking that a 3D animated match highlights display is not too much to ask for, even as an option?

But CM is still an awesome piece of software, which holds the attention for hours on end. It possesses that all too elusive quality – involvement. Bombarded with facts, real player names, work permit hassles, believable fixtures and the odd exotic trip abroad, the immersion is near total. After 50 or 60 hours, you are as close to being Alex Ferguson as you are ever likely to be. Or indeed want to be.

PLAYING WITH THE UNPREDICTABLE

For me, there is an element of adventure gaming in CM. You make tactical decisions, or juggle the line-up, or buy a key player. The world model subtly changes and sometimes a winning team slumps, or relegation candidates make the cup final. On odd occasions, you are sacked without so much as a message of support from the board. And we never exactly know why.

I must admit, this does leave me with a nagging doubt as to the hidden mechanics. What is really happening down amongst the algorithmic cogs and gears? Is it consistent? Would we spot a tiny bug if it happened? How is it possible to fully playtest such a beast? The factual depth of the game suggests such questions, but the resulting decisions could be considered quite shallow. So just as the very earliest soccer management games rolled a die to generate the score, one feels slightly manipulated by this black box approach.

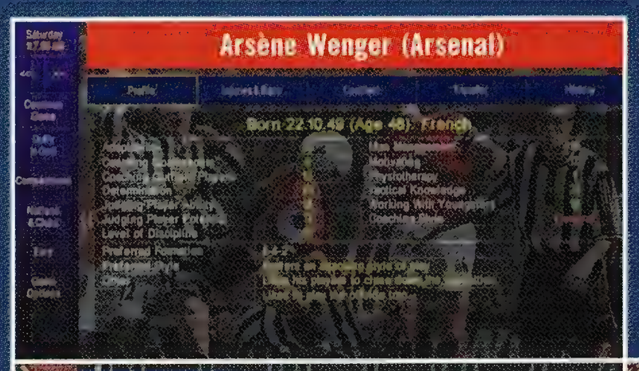
A development that would have me reaching for the credit card is a decent historical game. Imagine CM-style analysis for the 1961 season, the Mexico '70 World Cup, Liverpool in the '70s and '80s or Manchester United's triple. A good friend of mine would happily retreat to the glory year of Leyton Orient...

One program that offers much of this nostalgia is virtually unknown, yet I rate it as a programming feat to rival CM. Stats Soccer Replay is a brilliant piece of design and a labour of love. Because it is essentially a bare bones results engine, you will not be disappointed by the depth of statistics, amazing accuracy of results, or by its speed. The trade off, being a 'third world' production, is that there are no graphics and few frills - it awaits a talented interface designer. And because it focuses on rapid depiction of entire seasons or tournaments, you are restricted to top-level decisions. But you can exert an acceptable level of control, there are scads of historic databases ready to import, and the joy is watching seasons of fixtures unfold in the time that CM takes to calculate a week. You can find details on the game at www.sportsgameshop.com. I am pretty sure you won't be disappointed.

Quote

What is really happening down amongst the algorithmic cogs and gears? Would we spot a tiny bug if it happened?

So where next? I have often toyed with the idea of what I call the 'fractal' soccer management game. That would mean the simulation ran at all levels, and allowed participation as the player chose. One day you might take decisions at board level, monitoring share prices, praying that you qualify for Europe, and handling journalists and the F.A. On another you simply choose the team and send it onto the pitch, relinquishing control. But the chance to step into the boots of the 'keeper, or slot home the winning penalty is a treat I am looking forward to. I am not sure I'd wish to be the trainer or the team mascot, but whatever fills your brown paper bag...



Confession of a serial gamer

***Martin Croft** looks back over 30 years of dedicated time-wasting. Hey, somebody has to play all those games...*

I have a confession to make: I've been a wargamer since I was 10. That's 30 years – so I've been pushing around little plastic soldiers for longer than most wars lasted. Of course, that isn't all I've been doing: I've also been a board wargamer, a boardgamer (I'll explain the difference in a moment), a role playing gamer, a computer gamer and, most recently, an online gamer.

I started off with an Airfix Union army, refighting the American Civil War on a battlefield made up of an old sheet with piles of books for hills. Then I bought my first ever boardgame, SPI's Panzerarmee Afrika, followed quickly by Avalon Hill's Third Reich. I loved them both: the ability to refight entire campaigns and even wars rather than just battles, the grand historic sweep, the feeling of events in one continent influencing another.

DIPPY TEENAGER

Later, in my teens, I discovered more abstract boardgames. I say later, but of course some of them I had played as a child, like Waddington's Risk, Cluedo and Campaign. As a child, though, I had just been out to have fun and beat my big brothers and assorted friends: as a teenager, I was able to appreciate the subtle nuances of classics like Diplomacy, and to realise that winning wasn't the only purpose of playing such games. It helped that I wasn't winning very often any more...

Then occurred one of the most formative events of my youth: a friend introduced me to... Dungeons & Dragons. The sheer beauty of the basic concept behind the grand-daddy of all RPGs swept me away. Here was a game you didn't have to win to enjoy. Indeed, here was a game which you couldn't win. It was open ended, it was played almost entirely in the imagination, it was a social game, it was a game where the ability to talk and to play different characters was rewarded, it was a game where you didn't have to be yourself. And when you're a spotty, speccy fatso going through the traumatic teenage years, trying out different roles is pretty important – as is having a safe way to blow off all that aggression that builds up!

After four years at university, mostly spent refighting the great battles of the ancient world on the library table, hunting vampires in the Student Union bar and watching films – actually part of my degree course – it was out into the cold cruel world, and the search for a job that would fully utilise all the skills that my expensive education had equipped me with.

Yes, I got a job in a shop. But it was no ordinary shop: it was an Aladdin's Cave filled with everything you'd ever need to play games with. Lead figures, plastic figures, table-top rules, miniature houses and trees, RPGs, boardgames, wargames... And upstairs was the computer department.

Above: Dreams of Morkin in Doomdark's Revenge...

So I had my first exposure to the wonderful world of computer games: and alongside all the Donkey Kongs, the Smurf platform and ladders games, Space Invaders, Asteroid, Breakout and PacMan (this was the era of the Apple II, the Commodore 64 and the original Atari and Nintendo video consoles), I came across my first text based adventures and my first computer wargames.

Quote

Here was a game you didn't have to win. Indeed, here was a game which you couldn't win... played almost entirely in the imagination

Unquote

Soon, I had my own rubber-keyed Spectrum, and spent hours tackling brilliant games like Lords of Midnight, its sequel Doomdark's Revenge, Alien8, Alien Highway, Knight Lore – and some very early computer wargames, like CCS' games covering the Arnhem and North African campaigns.

Then, after a brief period working for a company producing interactive video management training programmes (the managing director thought my role playing experience made me the perfect person to write scripts instructing junior executives in effective time management and how to prioritise their in-trays), I got a job working on a computer games magazine dedicated to strategy and adventure games. That was in 1984, by the way, just in case you thought I was referring to PC Strategy Games...

OPINIONATED – MOI?

And, despite having to devote some of my energies to earning a living as a business journalist, I have continued to write about computer games ever since.

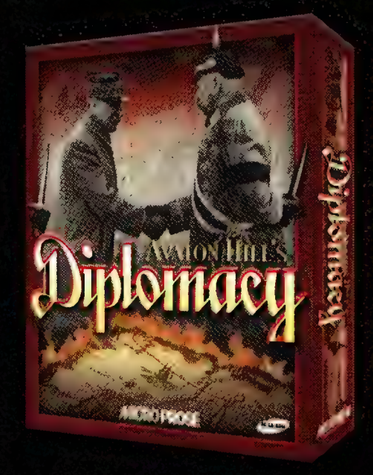
What I'm trying to say is that I love games, and that I have loved them for 30 years or more. I may not win very often, but I know how they're made and how they're played — and how they could be made better. You may not agree with my opinions, and if not, you're welcome to try and convince me I'm wrong. But at least you know that I've got something of a track record when it comes to commenting on games – as indeed do all of our editorial staff. PCSG.

Try diplomacy first.

You can always invade them later.

AVALON HILL'S Diplomacy

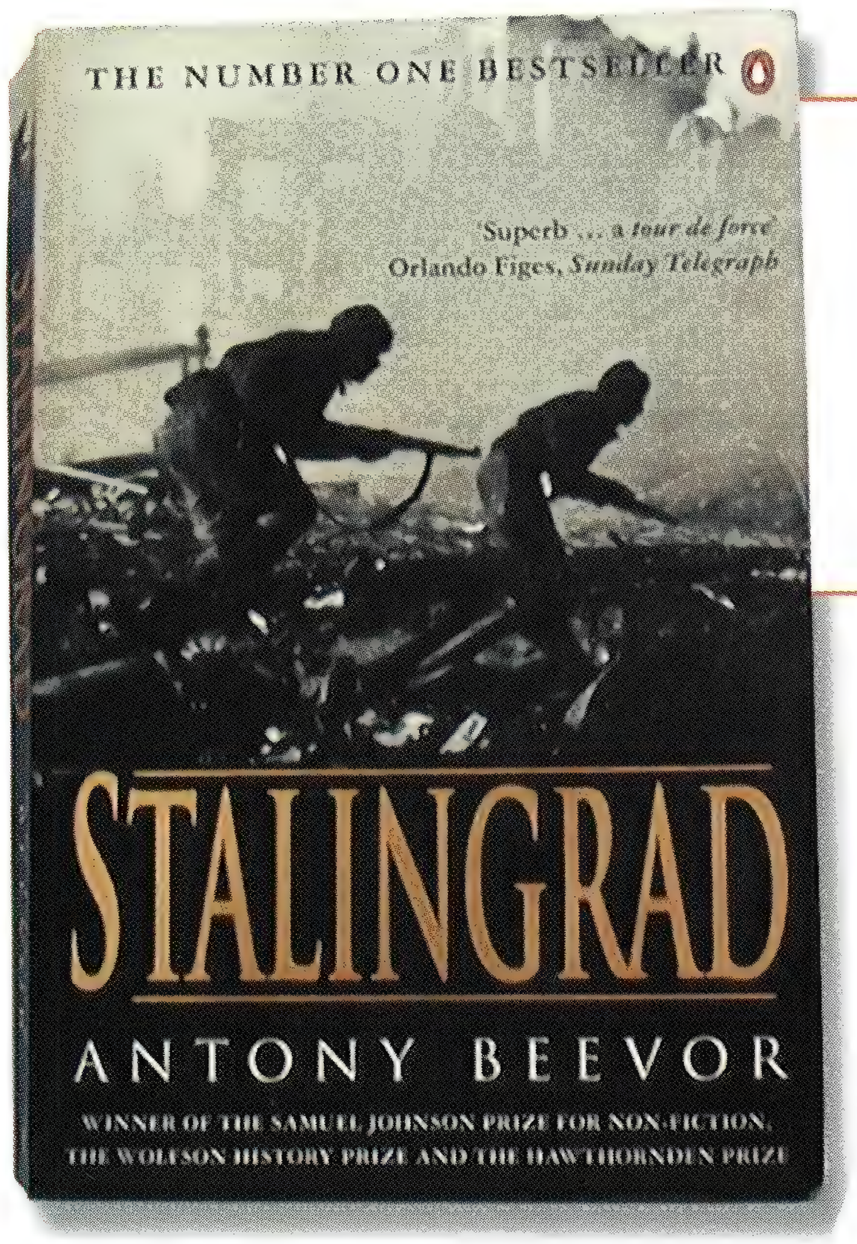
May your wit be as sharp as your dagger, Avalon Hill's Diplomacy is a turn-based game of political skill and cunning negotiation based on the world famous board game. It is set at the beginning of the 20th century when the Great Powers (Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Turkey, Italy and Austria Hungary) were seeking to extend their influence on the boundaries of Europe. Negotiate, threaten, plead and argue in a game where friends become pawns and enemies become allies. You'll have to be at your most cunning and most deceitful. This is Diplomacy with nothing left to chance.



MICROPROSE CD-ROM

HASBRO Interactive

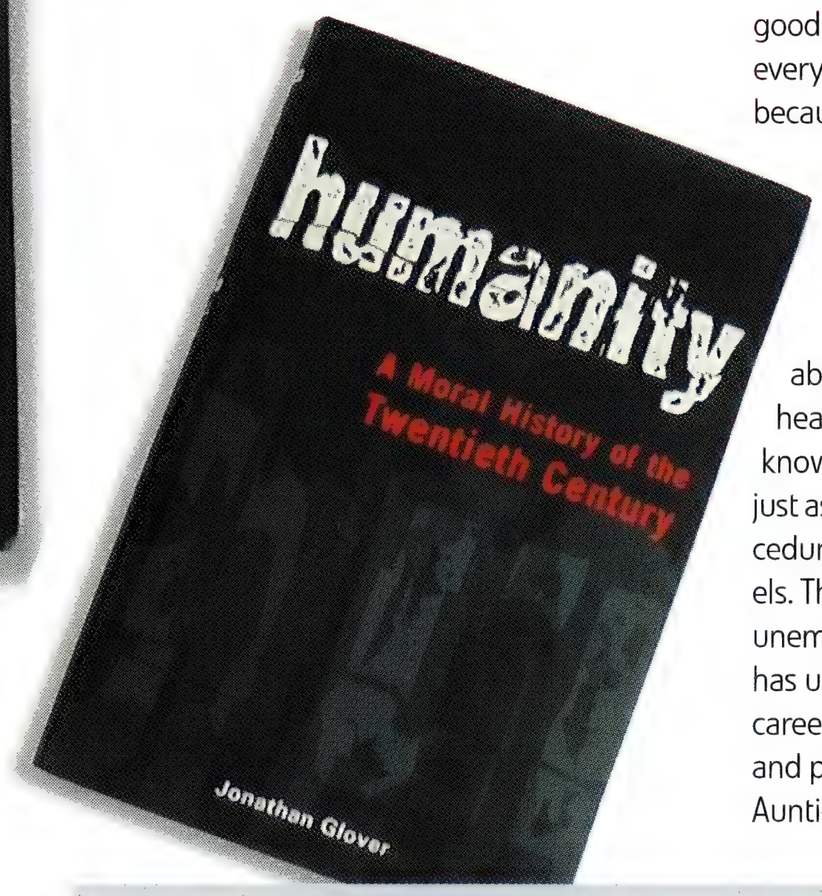
Stalingrad – the end of the beginning?


THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER
'Superb ... a tour de force'
Orlando Figes, Sunday Telegraph
STALINGRAD
ANTONY BEEVOR
WINNER OF THE SAMUEL JOHNSON PRIZE FOR NON-FICTION, THE WOLFSON HISTORY PRIZE AND THE HAWTHORNDEN PRIZE

Anthony Beevor's Stalingrad (Penguin, pb £12.99) is a masterful and scholarly account of what, for many, constitutes the single most decisive battle of World War II – the titanic struggle between the Germans and the Russians over the city named after Hitler's hated rival, Stalin. Beevor analyses the battle from a number of perspectives, expertly combining first-hand accounts with tactical and strategic analysis gleaned from military records. It is an instantly accessible, eminently readable one volume history of the battle and its aftermath, which led to the destruction of an entire German army. In its readability, its about as far removed from orthodox military writing as you can get, and should be a must for anyone professing an interest in the period. Indeed, it's so accessible that it may well introduce a whole new audience to the delights of well-written, well-researched military history.

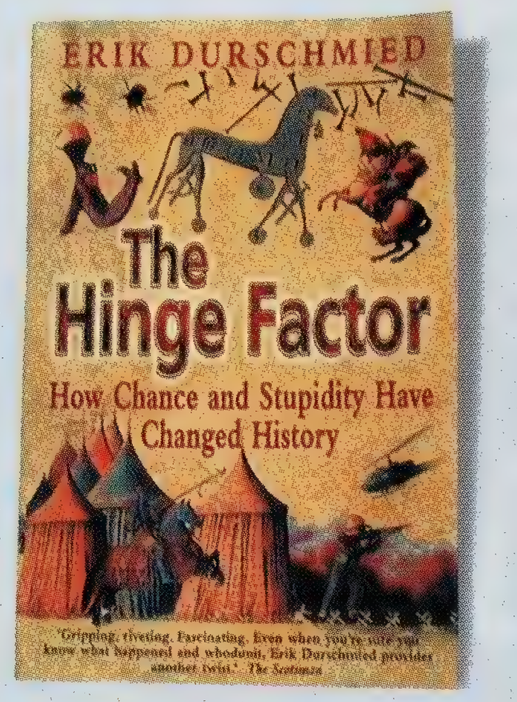
A title with a somewhat wider remit than Beevor's Stalingrad is **Jonathan Glover's Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century** (Jonathan Cape, hb £18.99), which explores one of the most perplexing and fascinating issues of warfare in the 20th century: how can men who consider themselves to be moral, and perhaps even Christian, order other men to commit the terrible atrocities we have seen over the last 100 years? While he considers Hitler and Stalin, it is the likes of 'Bomber' Harris, head of the RAF's Bomber Command he really focuses on.

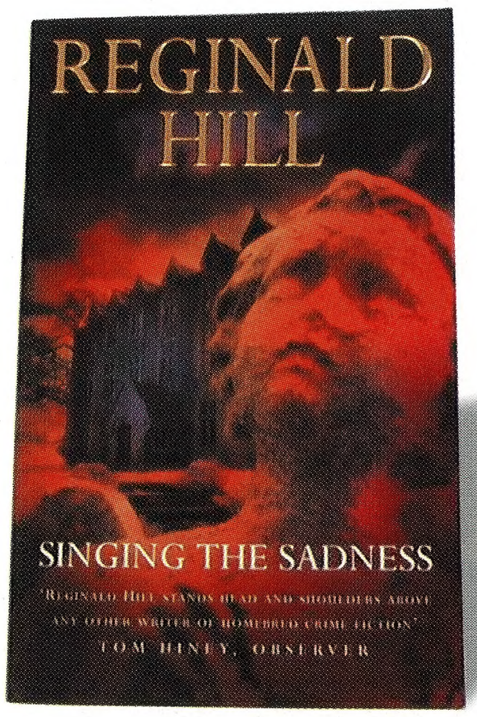
Glover looks at the different methods used by overall commanders and the soldiers on the ground to distance themselves from the reality of what they are actually doing, and provides a brilliant analysis of the psychology of prosecuting war. Particularly interesting are his observations on the way that US pilots and administration officials in both Vietnam and the Gulf War managed to reduce the victims of their bombing to ciphers – or, in the Gulf, to the targets in a video game. The more we fight war using high-tech equipment and computers, the less involved we are going to be – and the less we will understand of the true horrors of what we are doing. Nor does Glover allow us to hide behind the Hitlers and Stalins, summing up the fact that all of us could be monsters in the right circumstances with a quote from Alexander Solzhenitsyn: "The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being... it is after all only because of the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren't."



Moving away from real life to something much more enjoyable – crime fiction. You've probably heard of Reginald Hill, or at least his best-known creations, Pascoe and Dalziel: but just as good as his Yorkshire-set police procedurals are his Joe Sixsmith private eye novels. The protagonist Sixsmith is an unemployed lathe-operator from Luton who has used his redundancy money to pursue a career as a private detective. Short, round and perpetually bullied by his fearsome Auntie Mirabelle, Joe lives for three things –

If you like your history somewhat lighter, then you could always try **Erik Durschmied's The Hinge Factor: How Chance and Stupidity Have Changed History** (Coronet, pb £7.99). Durschmied provides a brisk canter through some of the great deciding moments of military history, providing an interesting, if at times flawed, commentary on what happened, what could have happened and whether in the long-term history would have been any different if the other side had won. A Canadian of Austrian birth and a war correspondent for 30 years (all of which may account for his idiosyncratic prose style), Durschmied often annoys by reducing great battles to a sub-Hollywood mini-series script. At times he also seems to be plain wrong – horses don't have talons, and the Red Cross was surely founded as a direct result of the Austrian-Italian war of 1859, not the Crimean War (although the latter may have influenced the organisation's creation). But so long as you're not expecting absolute history, and you don't mind a bit of faction, then it's a good enough tube read.




REGINALD
HILL
SINGING THE SADNESS
'REGINALD HILL STANDS HEAD AND SHOULDERS ABOVE ANY OTHER WRITER OF HOMEBREW CRIME FICTION'
TOM HUNEY, OBSERVER

his job, his singing and his girlfriend, nurse Beryl. Openly despised by the police and the villains he comes into contact with, Joe always ends up having the last laugh. In **Singing the Sadness** (Harper Collins, pb £5.99), lead tenor Sixsmith is heading up the Boyling Corner Choir to take part in a Welsh choral competition. But before a single note is emitted Joe becomes embroiled in high drama. Our hero ends up rescuing a damsel in distress from a fire-bombed holiday cottage, ruining his voice through smoke inhalation, and being hired on his sick-bed by three competing clients.

Gentle, funny, but with an underlying hard-core – such as the moment when Joe rejects the overtures of a group of ardent Welsh nationalists who automatically assume that, as a black man in modern Britain, he shares their hatred for the English. However, as he points out, he has many guises – 'time-served lathe operator, baritone, Luton Town supporter, PI, and you can stick English in front of all of them and I'd not be ashamed'.

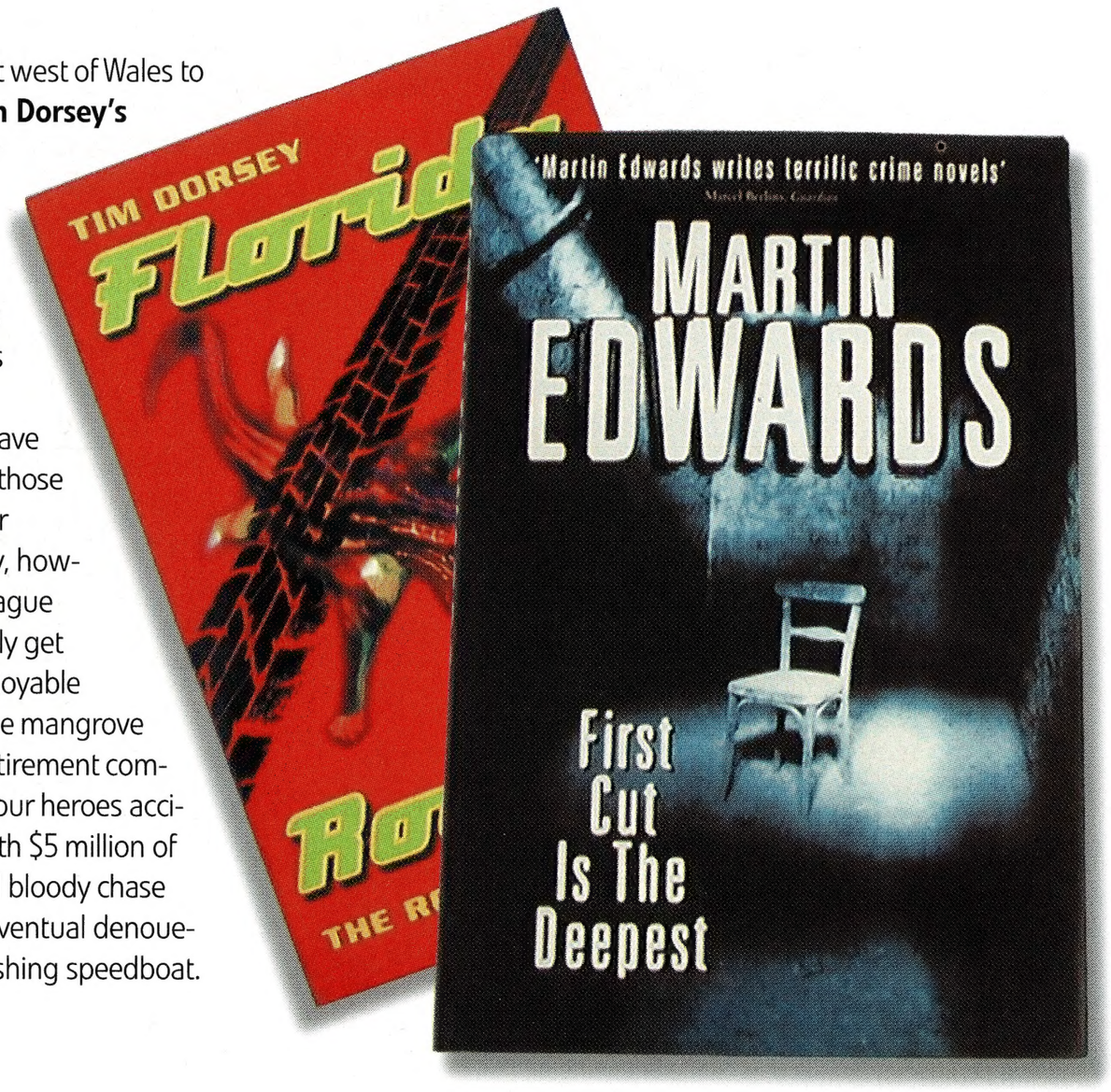
Video

STAR TREK: INSURRECTION

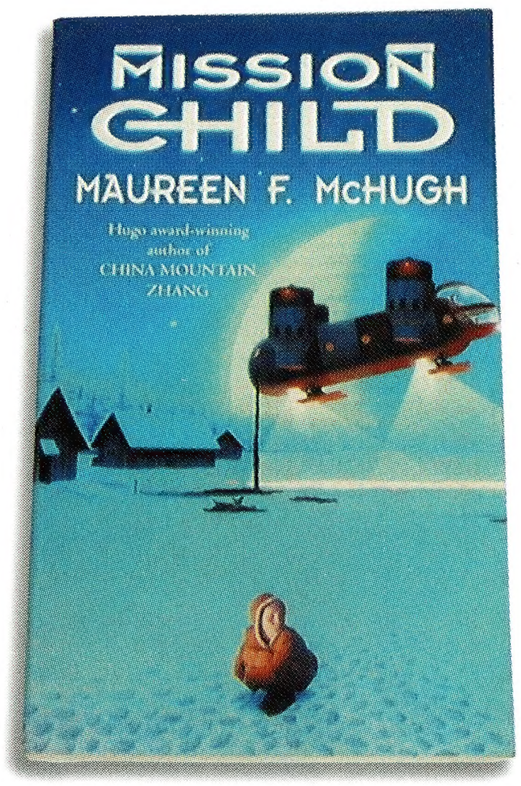
Star Trek: Insurrection (Paramount video, £12.99) got some bad press when it hit the cinema screens, but in fact it's a lot better than many of the critics argued. Granted, it's not up to the stature of the first New Generation film, **Star Trek: First Contact** – the first example of anything set in the Star Trek universe that was actually scary – or the (often unintentional) humour of the best of the original cast films, **Star Trek: The Voyage Home**, but even so, it deserves a second look. The plot is simple enough: Data, the android who wants to become human, apparently goes nuts while on a mission observing the natives of a pastoral, Eden-like world, and the rest of the Enterprise team have to figure out why. No surprises when they discover a plot to oust the peaceful natives to get hold of their secret of eternal youth, and even less surprises when Jean Luc Picard and the rest of the crew mutiny in the face of such obvious injustice and defy Star Fleet orders. It certainly romps along, with some excellent special effects and truly hilarious moments (check out Data's inflatable buttocks). And, of course, everything comes out right in the end. Plus there's no William T Shatner in sight – that's got to be a plus in anyone's book.

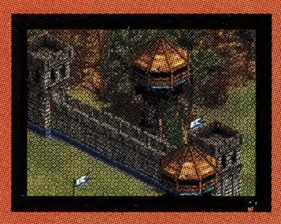
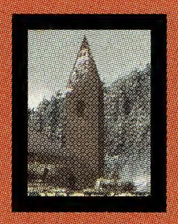
Back to the UK for **Martin Edward's First Cut is the Deepest** (Hodder & Stoughton, hb £16.99) – this time the location is exotic Liverpool. The main protagonist, solicitor Harry Devlin, is having an affair with the wife of one of the city's most notorious villains – but someone seems to be stalking Harry and his lover, and depositing corpses wherever they go for a spot of quiet nookie. Worse, and even more perplexing, is the fact that the murder victims are all lawyers, like Harry. This is a brilliant and disturbing thriller, which makes effective use of the Liverpool's tough, urban setting. First Cut is the Deepest is, amazingly, still fresh despite being the seventh in the Harry Devlin series.

Moving from the wet west of Wales to sunnier climes, **Tim Dorsey's Florida Roadkill** (Harper Collins, pb £5.99) is the latest in what is becoming a rather long line of Florida-set thrillers (a genre which now rates its own – Florida noir). Granted, some of them have been excellent – notably those written by Carl Hiaasen or Laurence Shames. Dorsey, however, isn't quite in their league (though he may eventually get there). Even so, it's an enjoyable enough romp through the mangrove swamps and high-rise retirement complexes of the OJ state, as our heroes accidentally get lumbered with $5 million of mob cash. Cue comic and bloody chase through the Keys to the eventual denouement on board a sport-fishing speedboat.



On the science fiction front, one of the more interesting titles is **Maureen McHugh's Mission Child** (Orbit, pb £6.99). McHugh won the Hugo Award (the Science Fiction world's equivalent of an Oscar) for her previous novel, China Mountain Zhang, and returns to some of the issues raised in that book – loss, change, the clash of cultures. Humanity once ranged the stars, but over-extended itself and retreated back to the Solar System, abandoning its scattered colonies. Janna, heroine of Mission Child, has to come to terms with the complete reordering of her world after a starship from Earth recontacts her lost world.



A word from our publisher

***David Lester** talks about why he's moving from the games publisher side of the fence to the computer magazine side*

My launching this magazine is what is usually called turning full circle. I started reviewing games and writing features for what were then major titles such as Popular Computing Weekly and Crash in the very early 1980s. I went on to found and run Impressions, which developed and published strategy games. I left Impressions in May 1998 (after we had sold to Sierra), and worked for them on a freelance basis designing Caesar III until September 1998. Now, I am launching PC Strategy Games magazine.

So, what's my problem? Can't decide which side of the fence has greener grass? Well, my reasons for starting both Impressions and then Crimson Publishing were roughly the same: I was bored, and felt that there was a gap in a market that I was passionate about.

GAMERS DESERVE BETTER

Many people have asked me why I'm launching another PC games magazine when there are so many already around. My guess is that many of you will already know the answer. I feel that the current magazines in the UK do a very good job entertaining their audience, with a frequently flippant, uncaring and irreverent look at games. I don't think any of them cater for the older, better-educated strategy gamer who's serious about gaming. We will.

By specialising in strategy games, we can offer you – the serious strategy lover – far more information about the games that matter to you than any other magazine.

We'll talk about the developers of the games, the reasons why some games have the quirks they do, where strategy gaming is going, what can be done about game AI, lots of background material about the games, and so on.

Furthermore, we plan to cover more strategy games than any other UK magazine, and in a lot more detail.

We will strive to be more independent than any other gaming magazine. Our reviews will feature an objective description first, followed by three separate opinions; our overall score will always be a simple average of the three scores.

And of course, all three reviewers will be passionate strategy gamers who know their subject well, and who will have played the vast majority of similar games in the genre. You'll also be able to see which games each reviewer likes best, and get to know which is most likely to match your own taste. With luck, that will mean you saving money by avoiding games that aren't your thing, and getting fun from some games you might never have bought otherwise.

Quote

Consider this 'your'magazine, because it's written by strategy gamers, for strategy gamers. I hope you enjoy it!

Unquote

I hate it when a review has clearly missed some glaring fault or other, or when a really great game gets unfairly given very little space or a poor review. I hope to fix that. We're sure to make mistakes – but I want to produce a far more objective, consumer friendly games magazine than exists right now.

You will probably be aware of the claims made by some other leading games magazines about fiercely independent reviews. As the ex-managing director of a games publisher, I know that some magazines do not always live up to these claims. In a future article, I'll give you the full details of an incident where these claims were acknowledged to have been ignored by a major magazine; there are others. I give you my word we'll strive to be different.

Given my background you'd be justified in asking whether I was still biased towards Sierra or Impressions. Yes, I still receive a small royalty on Caesar III sales, and an even smaller one on Pharaoh. But both games are too old to be reviewed by us here (though they may appear in round-up features), and I have no ongoing involvement with any games developer or publisher.

MAKE YOUR OWN MIND UP

I have also told Martin, the editor, that he has complete editorial independence from me regarding review scores. But then, my words now don't matter – you'll make your own mind up, issue by issue.

I hope, though, that my knowledge of the 'other side' of the industry will help us show you more about why the industry is the way it is, and where it might be going. For example, every article I've ever read about 'why games cost so much?' or 'where does the £35 you pay for a game go?' has been wrong. If we ever do such a story, then you can rest assured we'll get the facts right.

Many of you may know me already from the internet support I gave to Caesar III when it came out, or to Lords of the Realms 1 and 2 before that. I was passionate about both games, and also committed to our customers, to finding out what they wanted and to doing all we could to providing that. I am just as committed today – but now I'm committed to this magazine.

Consider this 'your' magazine, because it's written by strategy gamers, for strategy gamers. I hope you enjoy it – and I look forward to hearing the inevitable, but hopefully constructive, criticism! PCSG.

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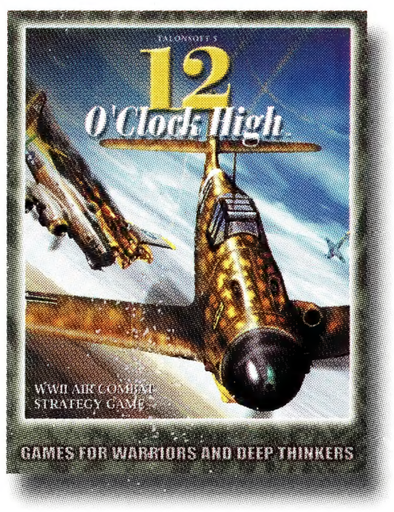

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